Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Fractured Elements

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An amnesiac, human-turned-Chimchar wakes up on an island solely populated by Pokemon. A travelling Riolu agrees to help him, but after growing suspicious of the island's erratic climate, they find themselves on a journey more dangerous than either could have imagined.

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The Storm and the Treecko

Something rough brushed over his face, stirring him awake. He opened his eyes and flicked his head, which was all the leaf needed to fly away again.

He blinked to adjust to the harsh daylight, then paused.

I'm outside. Why was I sleeping outside?

He tried sitting up, but his head ached immediately, making him groan and slump back down. So on his back, he looked upwards. There were trees, enormous ones, obscuring a cloudy sky. He managed to turn his head sideways, but there was just more huge trees, huge shrubbery, some kind of dirt path on the ground. Was this a forest? A forest for giants?

More importantly, what am I doing here, alone? I don't even recognise this place. How did I get here? I don't remember-

He froze. He *didn't* remember. The strangeness of his situation automatically made him cycle through his memories for some kind of clue, but they returned nothing. It wasn't like a temporary mind-blank; everything had gone. He'd hit a virtual brick wall.

Deep breaths. Breathing itself felt peculiar for reasons he couldn't identify, but he ignored that thought for now. He tried searching again, battering against the mental wall. *I can't have forgotten everything. I can't! There must be something-*

As if in response, his head suddenly felt like it was splitting in half. He screamed and closed his eyes, heart thudding in his ears like Rapidash hooves. His hands moved of their own accord then, towards the base of his back. They felt something warm and he was instantly a little calmer, his headache receding.

He listened to his surroundings. There were bird cries in the air, a gentle breeze blowing leaves, water flowing from a nearby river. The sounds were so crisp and sharp to his ears that for a moment he was content to soak them up. But then his consciousness bit back at him. Now he was asking: *Why can I feel heat underneath me?*

He opened his eyes to check, and felt like screaming again.

His body was… where even to begin? Fur covered everything, either orange or light-yellow; his stomach had a weird swirl marked on that he couldn't remove; he felt what was surely claws hidden within his fingers and toes, the itchy sensation making him squirm. Turning on his side and twisting his head, he saw that where his back ended there was a stub, whose end was burning with a red-yellow flame.

He stared at the flame. Very slowly, he moved his back an inch. The flame moved with it. He moved a shaking orange arm towards the flame and felt no change in temperature, then pushed his whole hand inside. All he felt was that nice warmth again. He grabbed the nearest thing he could find, a clump of grass, and did the same procedure; this time it charred in the heat and quickly fell through his fingers. So this fire attached to him was real. Was *he* real?

The river was in his periphery a few feet away. *If this was a dream, then my reflection would look funny or something, right? Maybe? Please?*

Of course, there was an equal reason for seeking the river. If this really *was* real, he needed to look at his body properly.

He moved carefully so not to trigger another headache. Yet he still collapsed on his stomach the moment his legs were planted to get up. His centre of gravity felt completely different. He fared better on the second attempt; then he kneeled upon reaching the river until his head poked over the edge. Looking back at him was a terrified, confused creature, whose head seemed as big as the rest of its body combined, with massive ears and eyes and some strange fluff sticking up on top of it. He waved a yellow hand across his face, and

the creature did too. He moved it through the water; not only did it ripple but it made his hand sting a little.

He stared at the reflection for some time, as if daring it to go away, to show him something *human*, rather than…

He paused, and this time a thought did float through his mind, a name. *Chimchar.* Yes, that's what he was. A Pokémon.

But… but how?! How can this be happening? I don't understand! I'm a human, I've been a human all my life, that's what humans do*, they don't just… turn into Pokémon! Why can't-*

A sudden gust of wind threw him forwards then, and he squealed in trying to retain his balance. As he scrambled away from the river's edge, something hit his shoulder. He looked up; the sky was covered in stormy, dark clouds. A few more raindrops hit him, and they stung like his hand had done. It couldn't be acid… could it? As a painful drop sizzled his tail, he realised. *Rain… water! Chimchar's a fire-type. I'm* on *fire! I can't stay here, I need cover!*

The rain intensified, and his energy was dropping alarmingly fast. He hurriedly looked around, but all he could see were those huge trees in every direction, and they wouldn't be adequate cover. Without time to hesitate, he chose a clear looking path to his right and took off.

If I don't find somewhere protected, I'll surely pass out from this rain. And what then? There are probably other Pokémon living here… what would they do to me?

He was getting more used to his body now, but running on two legs felt extremely clumsy. His arms seemed to push downwards against his will, his back asking to hunch over. He had little energy to try resisting the feelings, but was still shocked at what happened when he gave in. He was running on all fours, and it felt *good.* Far more balanced and agile with his back legs pushing forwards.

The rain was only getting heavier though. He scanned the area again. His sense of vision, much like his hearing, felt enhanced, and enabled him to see the shelter about 200 metres away. A group of fallen tree trunks created a half-roof type structure, which he bet would be enough to shield him.

He was approaching as fast as he could, but the rain continued to pound down. He gritted his teeth, the few of them he had, trying to block out the pain. *Just… a bit further…*

When he thought he was about to collapse, he reached the shade and dry of the first tree and immediately felt a wave of relief on his chest. He walked a little further until he could be sure he was safe. It seemed the adrenaline, or whatever else was carrying him, was wearing off rapidly, and he collapsed onto his stomach out of exhaustion. He was content enough to lie there in half-consciousness.

After some time, he sensed another presence nearby. Shaking off some of the water from his head, he looked up. A furry blue-and-black face with a big muzzle stared back at him. He squealed and feebly shuffled backwards. *Please don't attack me, please don't attack me… !*

The Pokémon didn't move, but made a sound like chuckling.

"Hey, I'm not a wild, 'mon," it said. The Pokémon instantly attributed itself as male in his head, though he couldn't understand why. "Even if I was, attacking you like you are now would be a low move."

At first, he didn't really process what the message meant. *This Pokémon just spoke to me, and I can understand them… But I guess if I'm a Pokémon too, it makes sense that I speak their… language? Do Pokémon have a language?*

The blue Pokémon frowned at him. "Are *you* a wild? That why you can't speak? I assumed you were a traveller too, seeing as there aren't any Chimchar around here…"

He didn't know what *wild* meant, but it didn't sound good. He cleared his throat and opened his mouth. "I, um…" He cringed; his voice felt completely foreign, too high pitched and childlike. But the Pokémon's eyes widened, amused, and he felt he had to finish. "No. Sorry."

"Mmm," the Pokémon said, smiling. "Well, you have a name, I take it? I'm Ryu."

He paused. *My name… do I know my name?* Somehow, Ryu's question caused something in his mind to click.

"Yes!" he said aloud. "Fen! My, uh - my name is Fen." If words were inanimate objects, he would have hugged this one with all his might. He looked at Ryu's confused face, and another memory came to mind.

"Wait, Ryu, you're a Riolu? That's why your name's… like that?"

Ryu looked at him as if he was an idiot. "Obviously. You've never heard a name like that before?"

Fen looked blankly back at him. *I didn't even know you could talk, how am I supposed to know what you name yourselves?*

But he was quickly realising that Ryu was his only grip on this strange, scary environment, and he didn't want to lose that.

"I'd just forgotten what Riolu looked like," he said, half-truthfully.

Ryu nodded slowly. "Alright then."

He took a bite from a red berry in his hand, and Fen's stomach lurched uncomfortably. He was suddenly intensely hungry, so much that he worried he might properly pass out if it wasn't sated. Gathering his courage, he spoke to Ryu again.

"Ryu, what are those berries you're eating? And do you have any spare? I just realised how hungry I am…"

Ryu gave a bemused smile. "Sure but, how can't you know these? They're cheri berries. And we're in Cheri Forest. There's no way you could walk in here and *not* know what they are…"

Cheri Forest. Fen felt his hopefulness drop another level at the unfamiliar name. He looked sadly at Ryu and just shook his head, a lump forming in his throat.

Suddenly, the Riolu's expression changed from amusement to serious worry. Perhaps even panic. He bent down to Fen's eye level.

"Hey, what's wrong?" he asked. "You're… not okay, are you? Did something happen?"

Fen took some time to compose himself. He might have had very little to hold onto, but he refused to break down in front of the first living thing he met.

"Quite a lot, yes. I woke up in this forest about an hour ago and, well… I don't have any memories. I don't know how I got here, or where this is, or what those berries are, or what a 'wild' is, or who *I am* - I didn't remember my name until you asked me. There's nothing. I tried to remember, but it's like some kind of wall in my mind, and pushing against it really hurts."

And that's not even the worst of it, he thought. But while losing one's memories sounded just about plausible, he was sure that a human turning into a Pokémon verged on insanity.

Now Ryu was lost for words. After some time, he murmured, "Losing your memory, that's… I didn't think that was possible. Any idea how it could've happened?"

Fen shook his head. "I wish I knew."

"I mean, I'm not doubting your story. You can't have acted like you just did if you were lying. And you're saying you woke up in this forest but, like I said, you won't find any Chimchar in here, far as I

can tell. You sure you weren't like, dropped from space or something?" Ryu smiled, somewhat nervously.

Fen didn't say anything. *It doesn't sound too outlandish on top of everything else…*

"And here, I got plenty of cheri berries earlier," Ryu said. He opened a rugged-looking backpack that was sitting on a rock and pulled out a handful, tossing them over. "There's loads in the forest, so don't worry about that for food."

Fen thanked him, then took one of the berries and had a bite. It had a slightly spicy kick but little else. Still, it was good enough to satisfy his hunger, so he kept eating.

"Do you have any water?" he asked, feeling a thirst as strong as the hunger. Ryu passed him a flask which did the job, and he thanked the Riolu gratefully.

Ryu looked out to the storm. Rain still hammered furiously against their tree shelter. "This is really heavy," he murmured, then turned back to Fen. "So, what d'you plan to do once this is over? Do you… have *any* ideas?"

I'm surprised you're even asking, Fen thought. There was only one viable plan he could think of, though it was difficult to raise right away.

"Ryu, you said you're a traveller?" he said. "Where are you travelling to?"

"Heh." Ryu smiled sheepishly. "Good question. I don't really have an end-point in mind, but I *think* that staying on this forest's path will lead to Sanguin Town. I guess I'll be taking a look around there."

Two things puzzled Fen most about Ryu. Firstly that the concept of a travelling Pokémon, with their own bag and everything, felt utterly

bizarre. And second that Ryu had made no hint of a reference to humans so far.

"What kind of a place is Sanguin Town?" Fen asked. "And what does 'taking a look' translate to?"

"Uh… I've never been there, so I can't say much. But I think it's got houses, and there'll probably be jobs to be done, and… I think it's the biggest town on Kyunn, actually. Kyunn is this whole island," Ryu added helpfully.

Fen nodded. "There'll be jobs for Pokémon to do, you mean?"

"Well yeah, of course. Who else would do them?"

Fen made an involuntary gasp. Ryu was surely implying that no humans lived here - on this 'Kyunn' - at all. How could that be? How far away were they from where he used to live? Was it another world entirely, where Pokémon could talk, and they alone had built civilisation?

Ryu was looking oddly at him again. Fen knew now wasn't the time to question this, and instead asked, "Can I come with you, Ryu? Please?" He hoped his tone of voice wasn't too desperate, though it was difficult to hide.

Ryu didn't seem surprised, but he hardly jumped at the idea. "I didn't want to travel with anyone… but this is a pretty different case. So, yeah, you're welcome to follow me for a bit. Luckily you're a Fire, and this place has mainly Grasses and Bugs, so you're well covered if we run into any wilds."

Wilds. That word again. "You mean, wild Pokémon?" Fen asked.

Ryu shrugged. "I s'pose so. They're essentially Pokémon that'll want to fight if you come too close."

The mere thought of fighting something was setting off more alarm bells in Fen's head. "I can't fight, though," he said. "Or, I don't remember how to."

"You can't-?" Ryu blinked at him. "Yes, you can."

"I think I'd know if I could," Fen shot back. "I don't remember-"

"It's not about remembering!" Ryu interrupted, jumping to his feet. "It's like - everyone can fight! You don't need to think about it. If you…" He frowned. "It's weird to explain this. Your memories really got scrambled, huh? When we get in a fight situation, you'll see what I mean. I'll *make sure* you see," he added with a wry smile.

Fen hoped he was joking.

Ryu peeked out of the shelter, which had stopped hammering with rain. "Sky looks pretty clear. We should get going, if you… whoa." Fen saw his eyes widen. "When did *that* happen?"

Fen followed his gaze. He saw with alarm that the storm had knocked several of the forest's trees, admittedly smaller ones, straight off their trunks and into the path.

Then one of Fen's ears twitched involuntarily, and he heard a faint sound coming from the fallen trees. He walked closer, and before he could dwell too much on the strange sensation, he noticed what was wrong. "Ryu! Agh, something… something awful's happened!" He gestured wildly.

"Huh… what d'yo-". Ryu stopped in shock at the sight in front of them. His next words were barely audible. "Oh, *Mew*…"

Underneath one of the larger fallen trees, there lay a Treecko on its stomach, legs crushed underneath the bark's weight. Its arms were splayed out ahead of it, weakly thrashing about, and it choked on tears as it squeaked semi-coherently, "Please… help… *anyone*…"

Fen could hardly move. Could this day be any more of a nightmare? He'd woken up as a memory-less Pokémon, barely survived a storm, and now he was watching a Pokémon die right in front of him…

No! Determination stirred within him, enough to break him out of his frozen state. He gave Ryu a shake, as he looked frozen too.

"Ryu, can we lift this?" he asked, gesturing to the fallen tree.

"Uh? Oh… yeah, 'course." Ryu slowly walked up to the tree with him, then they took hold of the trunk and heaved. Fen was expecting a struggle, but to his amazement Ryu's side of the trunk lifted at once, which was enough to roll it away from the Treecko's body. However, even with the tree gone the Pokémon lay flat on its front, unable to move.

It must have been a very young child, being barely half Fen's size, but it at least knew some language. He carefully kneeled next to it, conscious to keep his tail flame out of the way.

"Hey," he said, doing his best to sound comforting. "Are you alright? Were you with someone when this happened?"

The Treecko turned its head ever so slightly to face Fen, then spoke in gasps. "With mum. For water… we were going-" She jerked her head left to indicate the direction.

Fen tried to think of what he would do next, but an equivalent scenario of trees falling on humans didn't exist in his mind. "Okay… what's her name?" he asked, hoping the Treecko's mother would at least have one.

The Treecko winced in pain for a few seconds before she could answer. "Tali," she said, before crying out loudly again.

Fen nodded. "We'll find her… it's going to be okay." Then he remembered another crucial detail. "Sorry… what's *your* name?"

The answer was barely audible. "Eka."

Fen scooped the child into his shaky hands, who didn't resist, and stood up. Ryu hadn't heard their hushed words and his eyes were wide with fear, so Fen explained as calmly as he could.

"We need to find her mum, Tali," he said, then pointed left. "She said they were going this way. Presumably they got caught up in the storm and were separated. We should try calling out her name, heading that way."

After a few seconds' pause, Ryu gave his head a jerk. "Alright."

Evidently, this situation was new to him as well.

They ventured off the path and into the recently soaked long grass. Fen hated it not only for its wetness but for the fact it was practically up to his shoulders, making any vision difficult. They walked as quickly as they dared, as the little Treecko was still a substantial weight in Fen's arms, and they wanted to make sure they could be as easily found as possible. As they cried Tali and Eka's names as loud as they could, Fen checked continuously that Eka was still breathing. She wasn't losing consciousness, but still whimpered with pain, her eyes squeezed shut.

It turned out 'left' wasn't a great direction to rely upon either, as they were quickly blocked by some thick brambles. They ended up taking the most viable path that appeared.

At one point, a Pidgey appeared from just above the long grass to their left, screeching and flying straight for Fen. He yelped with terror, unable to defend himself with Eka in his arms. But as the Pidgey was about to strike with its beak, Ryu materialised in front of him from nowhere and aggressively swiped it away.

His fist made no contact, and the Pidgey pivoted around a tree before diving in again. This time Ryu threw his whole body into it with a grunt; the Pidgey hurtled through the grass, nearly dropping to the

ground, but it squawked and flapped clumsily towards Ryu once more. Ryu ran and threw his fist at the bird so fast that it disappeared before Fen could fully process what he'd seen.

Ryu looked behind at the two terrified Pokémon he'd defended, and nodded them ahead, a slightly wild look in his eyes.

"Ryu…" Fen gasped, "that was amazing… thank you."

Ryu just muttered something about the Pidgey being weak, then led another round of calls for Tali.

They had been walking for about half an hour when they arrived at yet another impassable piece of forestry. "TALI!" Ryu cried. He sighed, rubbing his muzzle. "What if the directions she gave us were wrong? This place is too big to-"

He was cut short then as a green tornado barrelled into his side, throwing him several feet. Fen instinctively threw himself to the ground and into a ball, clutching onto Eka, as he anticipated an attack.

He heard Ryu bark, "Hey, watch where you… huh?! Fen, uncurl yourself! It's okay."

Fen lifted his head up to the slightly terrifying figure of a Sceptile on its knees, staring down at him. It took him a few seconds to make the connection between her and the Treecko.

"Oh, you're… Tali?" he stammered. The Sceptile said nothing, only bowing her head slightly in acknowledgement. Fen lifted Eka from his quivering hands towards her body. She very carefully took Eka in her arms, before breaking down in tears.

She said nothing, simply hugging her child. Eka had at least now opened her eyes, though she was too weak to say anything.

"Her legs are… not in the best shape," Fen said carefully. "We think a tree fell on her in the storm. She'll be okay, right?"

Tali glowered at him then, but she spoke much softer than he would've imagined. "I have no doubt. It may take time, but we have oran berries stored at our home here for situations just like these. We were running to get out of the storm when I must have lost my grip on her. We can deal with rain just fine, you see, but the wind it brought was too much to handle… oh, but if only I had something to offer you both! I would have never expected a couple of travellers to go out of their way like this. With all my heart, I thank you. If there's anything I can do in return… anything, please just ask. Oh, and Riolu." She glanced at Ryu regretfully. "I was panicked, running in the direction of your calls, and couldn't catch sight of you in time. I am sorry."

Ryu shifted awkwardly. "Heh, s'cool."

He beckoned Fen over then. "Dunno about you, but I'm totally lost in here," he muttered, and Fen smiled, agreeing. They'd never considered in their haste where they were actually going.

Fen sensed what Ryu was thinking. "I'd ask her," he said.

Ryu didn't hesitate. "Um, Tali, there is one thing you could help us with," he began. Tali was still on her knees, meeting them at eye level. "We were heading for a place called Sanguin Town at the end of this forest, but we've gotten a *liiittle* lost out here, so… do you know the right direction to go?"

Tali chuckled softly. "I *can* help you there. You're not far from Sanguin, actually. The main path to reach there should be, hm, I make it south from where we're standing." She gestured behind her. "You were on the main path before, I take it? So following this way from where you're stood should lead you straight there."

Ryu smiled. "Alright, thanks." After Tali reciprocated, they set off along her route.

"Y'know, Fen," Ryu said when they'd rejoined the path, "I didn't think I'd be saying this back at the tree shelter, but I'm glad you were with me then. I wouldn't've had any clue what to do with Eka on my own. I was frozen; you snapped me out of it."

Fen lifted his head up and saw Ryu's red eyes glowing with a genuine admiration. Slightly embarrassed, he stumbled towards an answer. "I wasn't sure what to do either, but… well, I'm glad it all worked out. I should thank *you* for protecting us from that Pidgey."

"Oh, that was nothing." Ryu shrugged, then gave Fen a mischievous nudge. "But y'know, they'll be plenty more wilds around here. Guess I should teach you how to fight, unless ya want that to happen again, eh?"

Fen looked at him doubtfully; Ryu definitely wouldn't be dropping this. The concept of Pokémon attacking each other was nothing new to him, but now he was one himself, and there was one right next to him that could talk, he needed some reassurance.

"If I really have to, Ryu," he said, "then there's a few questions I want to ask…"

Instinct

Ryu had a definite swagger now. Fen sensed the Riolu was enjoying his own naivety greatly, which he didn't feel too happy about.

"Alright," Ryu said, smiling. "What d'you wanna know?"

"Well," Fen began carefully, "why can we expect Pokémon to attack just upon seeing us? I mean, we didn't do anything wrong to the Pidgey, did we? And why didn't Tali attack us when we met her? And… what's the relationship between us and the 'wilds' you mentioned? We're not wilds, are we?"

"No," Ryu said immediately. He scratched behind an ear. "That's a lot of questions."

It's not easy when your mind is a blank canvas, Fen wanted to snap at him, but he kept his irritation internal. "Should I go slower, or…?"

"No, no, it's fine," Ryu said, chuckling. "I think I can explain.

"So, wilds. When Pokémon are hatched, some are raised by their parents, siblings, y'know, supposedly the 'right way'. But others might get abandoned pretty quickly after birth, or just grow up in very challenging circumstances."

Fen nodded him on.

"If a Pokémon doesn't have a stable upbringing, it's difficult to stop them becoming pretty feral in general life. Those are wilds. They can't communicate very well and are very territorial - we all are to some degree, but the more rational 'mon like you and me probably won't react strongly to someone invading our personal space. A wild would want to fight you if you did." He frowned. "Although you might still be *challenged* to fight by a perfectly intelligent 'mon if you come into their territory. Not only if they're angry with you, but because pretty much all 'mon want to fight and grow stronger through it, so

they can win more fights. Everyone wants to be able to utilise more powerful attacks, evolve, etcetera, y'know?"

Evolve? That thought hadn't even occurred to Fen. But he knew Chimchar had at least one evolution, maybe two. His mind was flooded with even more questions. *What would it feel like to evolve? To have your whole body change shape in a flash…? Would your thoughts, attitudes, feelings change as well?* He couldn't imagine it.

"Are you trying to evolve then?" he asked.

Ryu huffed. "I'd love to be a Lucario, but I ain't got a clue how to do it. Might be through fighting, might be something completely different. I asked my parents countless times to tell me how, but they just kept on repeating the same BS, like 'be friendly with everyone', and 'always do your best', which doesn't help at all." He spat at the ground in disgust. "So it's still a mystery to me."

Fen only vaguely remembered the names of Ryu's species, so couldn't help him with that problem. *Ryu sounds pretty down on his parents. Is it just because of his frustration with evolution, or something else?* He decided not to probe further. *I've only known him a few hours, after all…*

"So, Tali didn't attack us because she's not a wild?"

"Yup."

"Okay. One other question on wilds… how 'feral' are we talking? I mean, do they, uh… eat other Pokémon, like if they defeat them in battle?"

Ryu gave him a serious glance. "Some 'mon eat others, but I don't know of any around here. It depends on the species too: I know mine wouldn't be hunted, and I doubt yours would either. Besides, you wouldn't usually fight to the point of passing out. Even wilds aren't *that* stupid."

Fen felt a little reassured.

They walked on for a while. The path was straight and flat, and the only challenges were from Pokémon themselves; bug-types, or just 'Bugs', as Ryu described the likes of Wurmple and Caterpie, which Fen recognised. To his relief, Ryu took them on alone and swatted away most of the challenges in one swipe of a fist, as if impatient. Yet, as Fen watched him fight, a tingling sensation rose from his stomach into his limbs, making them spark with energy. He already hated these feelings. *The safest thing is to avoid fights, and that's what I'm going to do! If my body has to then rewire itself, so be it.*

The sun was beginning to fade when a Shroomish suddenly jumped out from some tall grass and made a strangled cry at them. Fen looked to Ryu as he had done repeatedly, but this time got a smirk in return.

"Y'know, I've gotten tired of fighting for one day." Ryu shook his arm wearily as if to demonstrate. "This is a Grass, Fen, so it should be easy for you to handle. Just hit it with some fire attack and you should be good."

"Ryu," Fen muttered, "I told you I can't fight-"

"And *I* told you that you're wrong." Ryu grabbed his arm and shoved him forwards to face the Shroomish. "You'll know what to do."

Fen looked pleadingly behind him, but Ryu was avoiding his eyes. *Fine.* He turned to the Shroomish. *Forget about using fire: how do I attack in the first place? What would a Chimchar do… I have these claws, so I guess I should try hitting it with them? Ugh, I don't want to do this…*

He didn't expect the yellow lump opposite to have any speed at all, so when it leapt out at him he was caught off-guard. He only managed to turn a shoulder into the attack, which was still strong enough to knock him off his feet.

As he got back up, the tingling he felt was becoming unbearable. But he refused to accept them. *I don't want these feelings! I'm not feral! I'm not even a Pokémon!*

He felt something on his fur and spun back to the Shroomish. A powder was rising from the spores on its back, streaming straight towards him. They prickled upon impact, so he raised an arm to brush them off… only he couldn't. His body was completely frozen. The Shroomish was free to run and tackle him again, and this time he was thrown through the air, landing heavily in a flooded bit of path.

The water stung; his limbs ached. He was furious at Ryu for making him fight, and at the Shroomish for fighting someone so unwilling. It was too much. When he got up this time, something in his brain clicked. He dropped onto all-fours, cried an " *AIIIEEE* " sound, and sprinted towards the Shroomish. Claws unsheathed, he slashed at it.

The first scratch connected, but it ducked under the second and skittered backwards. Fen saw the spores on its back changing colour and knew he had to act fast. Running at it again, he felt something rise in his throat, something… hot? Without time to hesitate he opened his mouth, and instead of a sound there came a burst of flames, hitting the Shroomish head on.

His surprise meant the stream only lasted a second, but it was powerful enough to leave the front of the Shroomish's body charred. It lay down meekly, seemingly in surrender, then limped away as fast as it could manage. Fen sat down heavily on the ground. His heart was pumping wildly.

What just happened… that was still me. I *was aware of attacking the Shroomish, then realising that it was about to do something dangerous. But…* He put a hand up to his mouth; still warm. *I just breathed fire! And I feel so energised, like I could fight all over again… is that a good thing?*

Ryu offered him an arm up, which he accepted. The Riolu was beaming.

"What was that?" he mocked. "'I don't know how to fight', you say?"

Fen sighed. "I guess you were right. Though I only remembered about halfway through."

Ryu chuckled. "That paralysis shook you up a bit, huh?"

Paralysis…? Oh, that's what it's called. "Given I can't remember getting paralysed before, it certainly did."

Ryu whistled. "You've not experienced much, then. Getting poisoned is *much* worse. And imagine getting frozen! Mad that that's even possible, right? Luckily, it probably *is* impossible for you, with ya tail and all. Would just thaw you out."

When you put it like that, Fen thought, *this tail is pretty useful. Hey, it's like having a box of permanently lit matches on you all the time. In fact, I wonder…*

"Ryu, are you planning to stop soon?" He looked up at the sky, which was turning grey. *I assume neither of us can see in the dark…*

"Yeah, just need to get some food and find a place to sleep. Why?"

"Well, my tail could light us a fire, right? I'm just thinking of ways it could be useful."

Ryu chuckled again. " *Or,* you could just breathe some out of your mouth, but… whatever ya prefer." He looked around, then pointed to the distance. "Looks like there's some sort of cave over there. That'll be warmer than out here."

Fen nodded his approval. Anywhere that wasn't exposed to the rain would do.

"In the meantime," Ryu added with a smirk, "you can help me look for more berries!"

Fen watched in awe as Ryu went to the nearest huge tree and jumped at least his own height up to a distant branch. Then he did it again, disappearing completely from view.

"Hey, don't just admire me!" Ryu said, just loud enough to hear. "You can climb trees too, right?"

Can I? Fen looked doubtfully at himself. He had no idea how adept his body was. *I guess I'll have to find out…*

He walked up to the tree next to Ryu's. They all looked the same, so he guessed it was a game of lottery in finding berries. He could see a branch about three feet above him, but he was pessimistic about his chances of landing that jump. As it happened, he *underestimated* his ability, and he yelped as his legs flew over the target. He grabbed a different branch in panic, and was about to lower himself when something made him pause.

This feels… incredibly natural . He got his legs over the branch, then jumped up to meet another one higher up. It was easy, like he'd been climbing trees all his life.

He reached for another branch when he felt his head hit against something solid. He looked up; it was a spherical red fruit. It looked like an apple, but seemed far too big to be one…

He sighed. *Of course it's too big . I'm too small.*

"Ryu, do apples grow around here?" he called out. "I think I found some."

He heard a *thud,* then faint pawsteps. "They do, but could you keep it down?" Ryu hissed. "It's not bedtime for everyone yet, you know…"

Noted, Fen picked the two biggest apples he could see, then held one in his mouth and the other in his hand as he managed the descent. He eventually jumped about four feet from the ground.

Ryu, leaning on the tree, tutted disapprovingly. "You could've jumped from right up there and you'd have been fine," he said, putting the other apple in his bag. He smiled. "Y'know, I've never met anyone who acts like you."

Fen sighed again. "Is that really surprising, given what I told you?"

"No, I… I don't mean it *just* in you not having any memories. I thought you'd still know roughly what your own body is capable of, but… well, you have no idea! You didn't know how big a fall you can take, didn't know how to breathe fire, didn't even know how to *fight…* It's like you're used to being something else entirely, something… not like a Chimchar. You get what I'm saying?"

Fen was both surprised and dismayed by how astute Ryu had been underneath his joking. He didn't see any point in denying the truth. He thought carefully about his next words, then decided, what did it matter how he said it?

"You're right, Ryu. One of the few things I'm certain of is that I'm not, or I wasn't, a Chimchar before I lost my memory." He took another deep breath. "I was - wait. Do you actually *know* what humans are?"

Ryu turned to him again and his eyes lit up. "I knew it!" he cried, punching the air in celebration. "You're not a Chimchar after all, that's so crazy! I caught you by surprise with my guessing, huh? Hahaha!" He jumped in the air a couple more times, unable to contain himself.

Fen didn't quite share the joy at revealing his secret. They were back at the cave now, and the two of them sat down, leaning against the narrow walls on opposite sides. Ryu took of his bag and carefully put it down next to him. In the absence of light, Fen's tail provided the illumination.

He repeated the question. "Do you know what humans are? They don't live here, right?"

Ryu's smile faded slightly as he considered the question. "I've heard of them in stories," he said, "but I've never seen one, no. They supposedly live in this world, far away from here, I think. To be honest, I hardly know anything about them. What are they like? You must know?" He leaned forward eagerly, like a child waiting for a story.

"Ryu, I don't think you get it," Fen said. "I'm not some kind of novelty. I woke up this morning, in this body, with no idea of how I got here, no memories of my past life… all I know is my name and that I *was* a human. This whole day has been terrifying for me."

Ryu nodded exuberantly; Fen wasn't sure if he was listening. "Okay," he said. "But you still remember what humans were like, yeah? Come on, it's not like I'm gonna get the opportunity to actually *talk* to one very often! So-"

"THIS ISN'T *FUNNY!"* Without thinking, Fen lashed out at him with a claw in his anger. It caught Ryu on the ear as he ducked out the way. Something in his eyes lit up, a look that made Fen instantly regret what he'd done.

Before he could react, Ryu jumped up and slapped Fen across the face, though *slapped* seemed too light a word for how it felt. In the tiny cave, it was enough to send him slamming into the wall opposite.

Fen yelped, more in shock than in pain, though both were plentiful. He put one hand to his cheek, which felt bruised. He glanced back at Ryu, whose own gaze dropped the moment their eyes met.

A few seconds passed, then Ryu looked at him again and spoke shakily.

"I'm… gonna head out for a bit. Look after the bag, alright?" Without pause, he hightailed it out of the cave and into the night.

In the silence that followed, Fen heard his shallow breathing amplified by the cave's echo. He was stunned. He tried to tell his shaking limbs that it was okay, that there wasn't any danger.

Ryu's on my side. He defended me earlier, he gave me food, he let me tag along with him… I just had no idea he could get so aggressive so easily. I shouldn't have gotten so angry… No, he should've just listened to me! Oh, we were both at fault…

Fen was incredibly glad that Ryu had left the bag, else he would've worried that the Riolu had left him for good. Now he was a little calmer, he took some time to think.

Was it really just this morning that I woke up by that river? He felt like he could've lived a week in terms of how much had occurred. Him and Ryu had been moving for almost the whole day, yet only now was he starting to feel a sleepy sort of tiredness, and not merely short-term fatigue. All the injuries he'd sustained on the journey had healed themselves far quicker than he could've imagined. Pokémon seemed to possess a stamina and durability that would be impossible in humans. And the fact that *he* could be living this life now… he couldn't make sense of it.

This experience *was* real. He had no doubt about that. Somehow, he'd ended up in this body, in this faraway place, and he didn't seem to be getting much help in finding his way around. One thing he knew for sure what that he had to stay with Ryu, despite what had just happened. This Chimchar body clearly had some battling capabilities, which he'd probably underestimated, but he didn't want to fight anyway, and he had no sense of direction in this forest. Ryu seemed shaky on the latter too, but he could certainly do the former.

He decided to plan what to do upon reaching the town Ryu was looking for. His top priority was absolutely to find out who he was, how he got here, and what was his purpose for being here. But the

way to go about that was again a mystery. He'd have to ask Ryu for help.

Distracting himself from his worries seemed an acceptable strategy for now, so he picked up the bag Ryu had been very carefully guarding almost all day. He weighed it up in his hands; it felt very sturdy, so he supposed it was made from a type of leather. The bag was plainly coloured in a dark brown, though on the front there was two diagonal slashes worn into the fabric. Some kind of insignia? It looked too precise to be from a battle.

He paused to consider whether to look inside, then decided it would probably be fine. Knowing their available resources could only be a good thing.

He pulled at the string holding it shut and peered inside. There was the remaining apple from the tree, a few fresh cheri berries that Ryu must've picked earlier, the water flask they'd been sharing during the day, a pinkish berry he didn't recognise, and… that was it?

He wasn't sure what he was expecting, but the fact that Ryu was travelling, while having only a rough idea of where he was going, suggested that the bag should be more useful than just carrying food and water. *Maybe that's all Pokémon need. After all, we're about to sleep in a tiny cave that only slightly shields us from the elements. This weather can't be very warm, but I don't feel cold, despite having no clothing.*

He shook his head in disgust. *What am I doing, thinking about clothes… I'm a Pokémon!*

Another thing that confused him about Ryu was his age. He was clearly well versed in battling, despite his size. Yet his behaviour suggested he was of similar maturity to a teenager, with his rapid changes in mood and fury at getting attacked. Could a teenager be as strong as Ryu had been in battle?

Maybe I'm overthinking this, Fen sighed. *Pokémon and humans are totally different. Who knows if 'teenagers' are even a thing to them?*

Ryu wordlessly announced his return by chucking a sizeable pile of wood on the cave floor. Fen hurriedly did up the bag and put it back where Ryu was sitting.

"Should be enough wood." Ryu smiled warmly, apparently not minding Fen's nosiness. He seemed to have calmed down, which calmed Fen, too. He gestured to the pile. "Whenever you're ready."

Fen nodded; not feeling confident in his fire-breathing, he took his tail stump in one hand and twisted himself awkwardly to lower it onto the wood. He avoided looking at Ryu for the smirk he thought he was certain to see.

Still, it didn't take long to get the fire to spread. He didn't seem to notice heat in the same way he remembered - while he could detect an increase in the cave's temperature, it didn't make him feel "warmer". Plus, he could run his hands through the fire and not be harmed at all.

He sat against the wall, satisfied with his work, and Ryu did the same on the opposite side.

"Ay, Fen," Ryu said hesitantly. "Sorry to slap you like that. I can, uh… lose my cool sometimes, if someone attacks me. I didn't hit you too hard, right?"

Until then, for a blissful moment, Fen had forgotten about their fight. "Um… no," he said. "I shouldn't have lashed out in the first place. But, Ryu…"

At his pause, Ryu looked up. "Huh?"

Similar to when Fen had tried explaining his memory loss, words seemed extremely difficult to come by. "Just… keep in mind what I said before that happened. There's so much that I don't know, don't

understand, and on top of that I have to learn all these *new* things like, how to fight, and… how to be a Pokémon, I guess." He shrugged. "It's hard."

Ryu nodded. "I get it. You're doing alright, 'mon."

Those four words meant more to Fen than they should have.

As they were eating, Ryu went on. "I noticed that the trees in here were thinning a little towards the end of the day. Hopefully that means we're nearly at the edge of the forest. I'm pretty sure of it."

Fen looked at him sceptically. " *How* sure?"

Ryu chuckled. "No matter what I say, you're gonna *have* to trust me… but I've been into forests like this one before. I know how they behave."

"Alright," Fen said tiredly. He yawned again. *My body's telling me to sleep, and from what I've learned so far, I should probably listen to it…*

"I, um, think I'm gonna call it a day here," he said.

"Fine with me," Ryu said. "The fire should go out at some point in the night. You'll probably wake up at the same time as me, but we'll head out as soon as it gets light anyway. If it's not *raining*, of course."

Thanks for reminding me, Fen sighed. He tried to move himself into a sleeping position, and another problem hit him. *I have no idea how Chimchar sleep.*

He started on his back, but found his tail was getting pushed into the ground below the rest of his body. Not very comfortable. He tried his front, remembering how he had collapsed earlier, and while this removed the tail problem his head was now in direct contact with the dusty cave floor. Finally he lay on his side, but due to the tininess of his body compared to his head, it was more like his head sitting

sideways with the rest of him in an awkward half-turn. *Good enough,* he thought.

Lying with his back to the wall, he opened his eyes and caught Ryu looking amused at his struggles. "Night," Ryu muttered, grinning. In one fluid movement, the 'mon curled up into a small, cosy-looking ball, then closed his eyes.

As he had been about to drift off, Fen re-woke with a start. Breathing rapidly, he looked around; he was still in the cave and the fire was still burning, though more dimly. Some time had passed, but it certainly wasn't morning. The sky was as dark as before. Ryu looked soundly asleep.

Why do I feel so tense? So anxious? He tried to calm down and, to his surprise, succeeded almost instantly. His feeling of fear subsided just as suddenly as it had appeared.

That's weird. Maybe I just heard something… but then, why didn't my ears prick up? This feeling definitely came from within me. How could that be, though? I was barely awake-

"OWEHH!"

He paused. There was *definitely* a sound now. A ruffling nearby revealed Ryu's red eyes open, alert like he'd never been sleeping.

"You heard that too?" Ryu whispered.

Fen discarded his previous train of thought and nodded. "D'you know what it was?"

Ryu shook his head. "It's a Pokémon, I'm pretty certain, but not a cry I've heard before. Hard to judge from echoes alone."

Just then, they heard its echo again, this time twice as loud. "OWWEEHHHH!"

Before the cry had even finished, Ryu wordlessly slung his bag on his shoulders and scurried outside. Fen ignored his better judgement to stay in the safety of the cave and followed him. *Whatever Pokémon it is, it didn't sound like a battle cry… more like it's in pain.*

Ryu turned his head this way and that, trying to pick up the cry's source. He suddenly shot off to the right, which headed up a steep incline.

Fen had his tail to thank for increasing the meagre amount of light he had to see ahead. Ryu was still in his sights, but only just. How the Riolu could weave his way through trees and paths in the darkness was a mystery.

Eventually, Ryu skidded to a halt along the hill, and peered over at what lay below. He quickly got down on his stomach and gestured for Fen to do the same. Looking over the edge, Fen saw a sort of crater about 20 feet deep. At the bottom, in the centre, there was a figure who looked to be suffering some kind of anguish, though Fen couldn't see anything causing it. It walked on four legs, and was entirely covered in white fur, save for its head, its claws, a scythe-like tail and an equally sharp horn on top of its head.

A name suddenly flashed into his mind, like it had done when he met Ryu. *Absol.*

Looking around from their viewing position, Fen noted a few other Pokémon that were similarly crouched around the crater. They were curious too.

The Absol flicked its head up suddenly. "Cover your ears!" Ryu hissed. Fen didn't argue.

" *OWWWEEEEHHHHHH!"*

Fen cringed as the ear-splitting sound vibrated the very earth around them. Nearby tree branches shook with the impact. He heard a few squawks from birds caught in the blast.

The sound slowly died out, and the watching Pokémon lifted their heads again to the white figure. It paused for a moment, then turned and galloped swiftly out of the crater, away from where Fen and Ryu were lying. Fen turned to the Riolu, who was shivering either through the cold or with fear. Maybe both. "Are we alright?" Fen asked.

Ryu's eyes were still fixated on the crater, despite the lack of anything now there. He finally pulled himself away from it. "Let's get back to the cave," he whispered. "If that thing notices us, it'll probably attack. And I couldn't see where it's headed now."

Mercifully, the fire in the cave emitted a very faint glow, making it visible from high on the hill. They both bundled inside.

"I've never seen a Pokémon like that before," Ryu muttered. "Lucky it didn't blow our ears off."

"Oh!" Fen exclaimed, surprised at Ryu's lack of knowledge. "I know what it is."

"What, really?"

"Yeah, I… think so." He frowned, starting to doubt his own memory, but went on. "It's called an Absol. I can remember a few things about them, like how they're exceptionally rare - obviously, since you hadn't seen one before and I didn't recognise its cry, either. They're said to be able to predict when a natural disaster is going to occur, which is why they show up, to warn other Pokémon around. I don't know how far in advance they can predict, so the disaster might be in a few days or it might be a month from now. The magnitude of its cry, though… like you said, my ears are still ringing."

"So you think something big is coming? What kind of disaster could it be?"

Fen had to confess he didn't know on both counts - natural disasters could encompass a whole range of events. "But for an Absol to turn up at all, I think that's pretty serious."

Then a thought occurred to him. "I wonder, that storm we had yesterday, or earlier today. That was pretty heavy, right? Trees got knocked down and all. Maybe the Absol could be warning us about that?"

Ryu looked at him quizzically. Then Fen realised something else.

"But that's stupid, because it would be warning us about an event that's already happened. Hmm… I'm really in the dark."

Ryu yawned. "That's night-time for ya. Can we get some sleep now?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Look, I just wanna get out of this forest, and if we're well rested we'll have the best chance of doing it tomorrow. We can't do anything about this Absol stuff, unless I'm wrong."

Fen was a little confused at his impatience to escape, but ignored it. "I won't object to more sleep. But, uh, Ryu?"

"Mm?"

"I…" Fen intended to mention the emotions he'd felt just before hearing the Absol's cry. He struggled to find the words to explain, though. It felt like an increasingly minor event the more he tried.

"Oh… forget it. Goodnight, again."

Ryu smiled. "Hopefully we'll wake up in the morning this time."

An Unusual Lodge

Ryu was the first to wake the next morning. Having a quick glance around their cave, his bag was still next to him, and a shake confirmed that nothing had been taken. The fire from last night had stopped smoking. Fen's tail fire was out, too. Ryu panicked briefly, thinking that it would only go out if he was dead, but he could see a clear rise and fall in Fen's stomach. Ryu recalled that it had been flickering when he'd been under the shelter. Maybe it went out while he slept?

He shook his head in disbelief. *Strange 'mon.*

He took out a few cheri berries for breakfast and turned back towards Fen. His main feeling about him was one of bemusement. How did a Chimchar get here, and with no memories of its life beforehand? How could there actually be a human inside there? *Well, there isn't* actually *a human in there. A human mind, maybe, whatever that means. But something that isn't normal.*

Yet despite Fen's quirky behaviour, he had enjoyed his company on the previous day. Their walking speed had been slower than he wanted, but he could live with that. And he still had no idea what humans were like. From the way Fen had been acting, they seemed quite apart from Pokémon. Hopefully he would talk more about it today, though Ryu had doubts that Fen fully trusted him, especially since last night.

He guessed that Fen might want some information about him in return, and frowned as he thought about how to present his story. Some bending of the truth would certainly be needed - but then, what was the point in worrying about this now? The aim for today was reaching Sanguin Town, and that required his focus.

His ears picked up a birdsong. *Sounds like Spearow. So it must be early morning. Time to get moving.*

Shaking his water flask confirmed that he'd need to refill it before heading down the path. He considered venturing out alone. It would hardly take a fraction out of the morning, but if Fen woke before he returned, he might think Ryu had abandoned him. For all his jokiness towards Fen yesterday, Ryu recognised how vulnerable the 'mon was. *And he should be up by now anyway…*

Ryu shook him a little forcefully and Fen immediately recoiled, his tail flame reigniting to confirm Ryu's suspicions. His eyes flicked around, and seeing his attacker, just groaned in response.

Ryu laughed and chucked a couple of berries in his direction. "Come on, we're getting water," he said.

Fen slowly got to his feet and shook himself, saying nothing.

"… You alright?" Ryu asked semi-seriously.

Fen looked at him vaguely. "Not really," he said. "But we have to get moving, right?"

"Uh, yeah," Ryu said. "Come on 'mon, we're gonna reach Sanguin Town today! Aren't you excited?"

Fen sighed heavily. "Sure."

Ryu explained to Fen that the only water source he knew of in the forest came from a river running all the way through it. "Before the storm yesterday, it was just north from this main path. Oh wait, that's where you woke up, right? So we should be able to find it pretty quickly if we head that way. I don't wanna stick around long though, since if this is the only place to find water, they'll be tons of 'mon getting a drink like us. We should be all right, but I don't wanna get into many fights today."

Leaving the path took them into long grass, which was practically dry today, owing to the heat since yesterday's storm. Fen still had to

push his way through to move anywhere.

It took about 15 minutes for the grass to clear, and there in front of them lay the same river that Fen had woken up at. It stretched endlessly in both directions, like Ryu had said, until distant trees on the bank enclosed it. Around the water's edge were a host of different Pokémon; Nincada, Zigzagoon, Pikachu, and others that he couldn't bring a name to.

Ryu headed straight to the stream and unscrewed his flask top. "D'you know how clean this water is?" Fen asked. "I know there's a lot of Pokémon drinking from it, but…"

Ryu nodded assuredly, dunking the flask straight in. "Yeah. Like you say, everyone else is doing okay on it. May not be the most fresh, polished stuff you'll see, but you won't pass out from it or anything…" He smiled cheekily at the thought.

They both took a long drink from the flask before Ryu refilled it again. It tasted how Fen expected water should. As they started heading back to the path, they heard a faint buzzing from the trees. Ryu, from his previously relaxed posture, straightened up and scanned around. "Something's ahead," he muttered, signalling Fen to stop walking. "In fact, more than one 'mon. Get ready."

The buzzing got louder, and seconds later a Ninjask burst out of the trees to hover in front of them. Below it were four Nincada in formation, looking ready to fight.

"Damn," Ryu muttered. "Okay, we've got a few 'mon to deal with, but it should be all right."

"What… are they going to fight us together?" Fen said, anxiety rising.

"Yeah," Ryu said, keeping his eyes on the enemies in front of them. "We took their drinking spot, I'm guessing. It's fine though. I'll take down the Ninjask. Try and keep the Bugs occupied, alright?"

"But… there's four of them! Come on, I don't want to do this…"

"Well, you *are* doing this, whether you like it or not. Besides, Nincada ain't gonna hurt you! You've got this!"

Fen tried to get in a battle mindset as the Nincada gathered in a circle around them, making a little hissing sound as they did. The Ninjask, having stayed still to face down its opponents, now started buzzing its wings. Ryu's eyes darted around, as if looking for a cue. "Get ready," he muttered.

The Ninjask set its wings in front of its body and somehow whisked together a mini tornado of wind, which it flicked away into Ryu's direction. There was no way Ryu could move fast enough - instead he stood in a braced position. Fen watched in horror as the gust engulfed him, though Ryu wasn't swayed from his stance in the centre of it.

Just then Fen sensed a movement to his right, and instinctively jumped forwards to dodge as a Nincada lashed out with one of its front legs. He spun around to face it, and barely thinking, lunged with a scratch of his own. The Bug was too slow to dodge, sent skidding backwards by the impact. Another one hurtled towards him similarly to the first, and without time to think of something clever, Fen simply crashed into it shoulder-first, to protect his face. The collision sent both of them sprawling, though Fen managed to haul himself back up. Both Nincada looked out of it.

Despite what Ryu had said, he was surprised at how easily they'd gone down. Maybe he could do this…?

He sneaked a glance at Ryu's fight, and saw that the gust was starting to clear around him. Inside, Ryu's body was glowing white, though he looked in considerable pain. Fen watched in awe as, when the gust had fully disappeared, Ryu threw himself into the Ninjask, transferring the white energy into it. The Ninjask hissed with pain and crashed into the trees behind.

Before Fen could congratulate Ryu, he was jolted by another Nincada scratch hitting the side of his face. He lashed out in its general direction and connected with a body, but its shell felt more robust than the previous two. He was confused. *It hardened its shell? That means my scratches won't do a thing…*

Then a better idea crossed his mind. Turning left, he saw the two remaining Nincada were huddled together. It was a long shot, but if he got it right they would go down easily.

It was easier to draw on the hot air now he'd felt it. He opened his mouth and sent a fireball into the Nincada… or he tried to. The flame was weak, not even reaching them before it evaporated. Panicking, Fen got ready to defend, but a second later the Nincada were scythed down by a flash of blue and black.

The enemies dealt with, Ryu skidded to a halt. To Fen's surprise, he sat down heavily and started panting in exhaustion.

"You alright, man?" Fen dashed over to him.

Ryu looked at him funny for a second then shook his head, but he didn't seem particularly injured.

"I really messed up," he said. "I was already preparing to counter the Ninjask's attack, but I forgot that it might use a flying-based move. Ugh!" He pounded the ground in frustration.

"But… you still won?"

Ryu looked at him cynically. "But I *nearly lost*, because of my own stupidity. If its attack had been slightly more powerful, I wouldn't have been able to endure it all and then retaliate, because I'm weak to Flying attacks. You can't afford to make mistakes like that!"

"Yeah, but…" Fen paused to try and explain. *I didn't think I'd be handing out many life lessons as a Chimchar, but whatever…* "We all make mistakes sometimes, you just… have to learn from them. Now

you know that when you face another Ninjask, you should maybe not use a… what was that attack you did, by the way? It looked amazing."

A slight smile crept across Ryu's face. He got to his feet again.

"We call it 'counter'. You basically take the power of an opponent's attack, endure it, then release it back on them, combining it with your own attack." Seeing Fen's eyes light up, he moved to play it down. "It's not as good as you think. Doesn't work for non-physical attacks - something like your ember, say. And if you can't endure the attack in the first place it's pretty useless." He sighed. "Anyway, you were doing alright against the Bugs? Managed to defeat two of them?"

"Mm," Fen hummed. "I'm getting better at this stuff, I think. Though I'd prefer to not have to do it at all…"

Ryu sighed again. "You're strange, 'mon."

Their chatter died down as the path became rockier and steeper. Even though Fen was better coordinated than yesterday, he struggled to keep up with Ryu. Fortunately, Ryu was content to walk at a slower pace when he asked.

They encountered no wilds at all, and even the constant bird calls Fen had gotten used to in the forest died down. He sensed that travelling Pokémon were the only ones that crossed this rough terrain.

It was late afternoon by the time that Ryu finally spotted a clearing ahead of them.

"Finally," he muttered. "I can't wait to see the back of this waste of space."

The repetitiveness and boredom of the day's walking had worn Fen down too, and he struggled to get pumped up about the prospect of

leaving. Plus, leaving the forest felt like a giant step into the unknown. He felt anxious thinking about what he would do upon reaching Sanguin Town.

At last they reached the top of the hill, stepping out from the trees into the unshielded sky. It turned out it wasn't merely a hill, but a *mountain* that they had been climbing for so long. The rocky path suddenly made sense.

Fen let out an involuntary gasp at the surroundings. Though this was where the forest ended, the mountain continued above them. Varying size rocks were scattered all around the huge expanse they walked on.

Looking around, Fen got an overwhelming sensation of belonging. He wondered if this was where Chimchar normally lived. It certainly felt like it. He was a little unnerved that basic instincts could impact his emotions so much; at the same time, this felt so great that he hardly minded.

In his excitement, he wanted to find the uppermost peak of the mountain. To his right was a steep cliff face, and he thought back to when he climbed the tree in Cheri Forest. They didn't look so different… surely scaling it wouldn't be that much of a challenge?

He tentatively looked for hand and footholds as a starting point. Finding some, he began climbing. It wasn't like the climbing he knew; this felt as easy as walking on flats. He stopped looking for footholds and just let his body take care of the ascent, and in no time had scaled the 20 or so feet to the top.

The way they had come out showed only forestry, and beyond that were grassy plains and vast mountains. Almost everything he could see was natural, untampered with. It was an incredible sight. There were a few places dotted around that looked to be towns or villages, but they were too high up to make out many details. He walked back to the edge of cliff he'd climbed and sat down to take in the view some more. As he did, he felt a familiar arm thump his shoulder.

"You like this place as well, huh?" Ryu smiled. He took a seat beside Fen. "Our line is mountain-dwelling too, so I can climb this stuff pretty easily like you. Always enjoy views like this."

Fen felt a little embarrassed at having run off so suddenly, but Ryu didn't seem to mind. The sunset had given the world a distinctly yellow-orange hue, something that seemed to resonate with Fen for a reason he couldn't figure out. As much as he just wanted to bathe in this view, he realised that with them both stationary for once, this was a perfect time to ask Ryu what had been bothering him.

"Could… I ask you something?" he ventured.

Ryu smiled slyly, as if he knew the question was coming. "Yeah… but only if you can answer one for me first."

"Which is…?"

Ryu rolled his eyes. "What do *you* think, Fen? I asked you what humans were like, didn't I? D'you think you could maybe give me an answer now?" His tone was light-hearted, but his words suggested he was a little frustrated with Fen's secrecy. "I'll tell you anything you want from me afterwards," he added.

Fen gave a sigh of resignation. *How do I describe this…?*

"Do you know what Machoke look like?" he asked.

Ryu nodded. "Those big, muscular 'mon." He flexed his arms in a mock impression.

"Right. Humans are a bit like those, except, well, they're a bit taller at adult size, they don't have tails, they all wear things to cover themselves unlike most Pokémon…". Describing a human to someone who had no concept of one suddenly felt very difficult. "Agh, forget it. The main thing is, they're not like Pokémon at all. They don't fight each other to get stronger, they can't breathe fire or summon electricity or anything like that, they can't evolve… well,

they get bigger as they get older, but they stay the same shape all their lives. And they're certainly not durable like Pokémon are."

"No evolution? No fighting?" Ryu frowned. "They sound pretty boring to me. What *can* they do?"

The cynicism in his question didn't really shock Fen. With everything he'd experienced so far, he could tell that Pokémon life was far more dangerous, active and, admittedly, e *xciting* than that of any regular human.

"Well, humans have invented loads of amazing things, like: being able to harness electricity to power other tools; having vehicles that can travel several times faster than they can, without running out of power… uh…" He tried to remember what else. "Look, the place I lived, where humans were, it looked very different to this. But I can't really remember the details…"

Ryu gave a sigh of disappointment. "You haven't remembered anything new since yesterday?"

"Yeah." Fen sighed in equal measure.

"That's a shame." Ryu drummed absentmindedly on the rocks for a second. "You wanted to ask me something?" he said.

"Yeah." Fen thought carefully. "The first thing would be, well, what are you doing here, Ryu? Why are you travelling?"

Ryu nodded at once. "Alright. Until a few days ago, I lived in Mt Aura with my family - Mum, Dad, and a few brothers and sisters. Growing up there was fine, in fact it's a really cool place, but it could get pretty lonely. There weren't many places around that were easily reachable, and not many other Pokémon could live there due to the mountains, so I ended up fighting my siblings quite a lot. Since I was the oldest though, I normally beat them all without much trouble.

"Now for as long I can remember, I've had hopes of being one of the strongest Pokémon around. That's what a lot of 'mon strive towards, right? Well, maybe you don't know, but they do. Unfortunately, my parents wanted me to just stay on the mountain, help with bringing up the family, foraging for food, stuff like that, which wouldn't exactly make me much stronger. So one day, I decided… I was going to leave, on my own. I wasn't sure what the end goal would be, or where it would take me, I just wanted to, say, see the world a bit, y'know? Call it a sort of pilgrimage." He chuckled.

"You left just like that?" Fen asked. "Did you tell your family or anything?

"Oh, sure, sure," Ryu waved in dismissal. "I told my parents about my intentions, and they weren't too agreeable, as you'd expect, but… I eventually convinced them. They gave me some food and water to help out, and the bag itself of course. This would be the… fifth day since I left there. The last three of which were spent in that lousy forest." Ryu hesitated in anticipation of another question. When none was coming, he spoke again. "What d'you think *you'll* do now?"

"Well… I think trying to recover my memories, and finding out how and why I ended up here is my top priority," Fen said. *I really don't have any other priorities other than staying alive. Actually, make* that *my top priority.* "I don't suppose you know anyone in this town that could help?"

Ryu shook his head sadly. "As I said, I know almost nothing of Sanguin. Sorry."

It was the answer Fen expected, but he still felt a wave of deflation upon hearing it. "I guess I'll just have to ask around."

They sat in silence for a while, doing nothing but enjoying the view ahead.

"I've got one more question, actually," Ryu announced suddenly.

What? Fen felt dismayed. *Haven't I told him everything I can?* He needed Ryu's trust, though. He couldn't obtain that if he acted secretively.

"What is it?" Fen said.

"It's uh… what's an hour?"

Fen blinked. He looked at Ryu, expecting to see a grin or for him to laugh, but Ryu's expression was completely serious.

"You said it yesterday," Ryu added, noticing his confusion. "You said you'd woken up an hour ago. At the time I didn't think it was worth questioning, but… yeah."

"I… right," Fen murmured. He smiled at the strangeness of it. Why *would* Pokémon keep to the same time system that he knew? "An hour is a period of time that humans use. There's 24 hours in a day."

Ryu nodded at that, but then frowned. "24?" he said, almost disbelievingly. "That's so many… how can you know when one hour's passed?"

"I can't," Fen said. "Not without a watch or something else telling me, which I don't have."

Ryu looked even more confused. "But… you did know, when you mentioned it."

"That was an estimate," Fen said quickly. "I didn't *really* know."

"I see…" Ryu thought for a moment. "You weren't awake very long then, if it was an hour."

Fen smiled. "That's correct." He paused. "I take it you don't know how long a minute is, either. Or a second?"

Ryu suddenly burst into laughter. "You're just making up sounds, now."

"No!" Fen sighed. "There are 60 minutes in hour, so one minute is pretty short. And there are 60 seconds in a minute, so those are *very* short. They're passing as I speak."

"No offense, Fen," Ryu said, "but my head hurts just trying to understand how that works."

Fen felt a little embarrassed at that. "You don't need to understand it," he said. "But if I say something about hours again, or minutes or seconds, at least you know that I'm not talking nonsense."

"I would try *not* to mention those things, at least around others," Ryu said sincerely. "But okay. I'm glad I asked."

After another minute of rest, Ryu got up and scanned the ground below them. He jumped down onto a rock a few feet below, then effortlessly stepped off this to land at their original platform. The distance he fell looked positively cataclysmic, and Fen was expecting to hear a crunching of bone, or at least a scream of pain from Ryu. But the Riolu landed almost silently, only grunting slightly and putting his arms down for stability.

Ryu looked back up and just waved him forward to follow.

When it comes to heights, Fen thought, *my human instincts are very much alive.* He landed on the same midway rock as Ryu, then faced down the rest of the drop. Holding his breath, he pushed himself off the ledge, then watched in terror as the mountain soared up to meet him. He tried to get into a good landing position, then squeezed his eyes shut. That was a stupid decision.

He misjudged his angles and landed on his front legs, which immediately buckled, leaving his face to slam into the hard rock. He yelped out of both pain and surprise.

He brushed some dust off his face, then paused. He wasn't surprised that his front legs, or arms, stung from the pressure his body put on them. But a little aching seemed to be the extent of his problems.

There were certainly no brakes or fractures. He looked back at the midway rock. It still looked far too high.

Well, I'm more durable than I thought, he noted. *I'll take any positives I can get right now.*

Ryu was staring at him, eyes wide like he was holding in laughter. "The uh, path we were on seems to lead down into the town," he said, leading them on.

Fen agreed, and they started the longer, less treacherous descent down the mountain.

The only way into Sanguin Town from their position was via a wooden bridge, running over a river a few feet below. They had to walk single file over it until a sole, tough-looking Mightyena awaited them on the other side.

It stepped out to indicate they stop. Then it ducked its head and sniffed around them for a few seconds, before grunting in recognition. "You're new here," he growled in a deep voice. Somehow, despite having never heard one speak his language before, it was exactly how Fen had expected a Mightyena to sound.

"Right, we're travellers," Ryu said. "Just come through the forest." He jerked a finger behind him.

"Hm." The guard didn't seem too impressed. "Hand over the bag. Just for checks."

Ryu groaned, but knew better than to argue, undoing the bag and carefully placing it at the Mightyena's feet. The Mightyena stuck his head in the opening while one of his feet held the bag in place, continuing to sniff furiously. After a few seconds he pulled away, grunting in approval.

"You have any business here? Staying for any time?"

"No *business* here, but we're looking to stay the night, at least," Ryu said. "Any spots you'd suggest?"

The Mightyena didn't appreciate his light-heartedness. "You don't have any money, unless I'm mistaken. So if you'd like somewhere to stay the night, you'd better come up with something once you're inside. But I have no problems letting you enter. Welcome to Sanguin Town." He stood aside and bowed his head in welcome.

As soon as they were out of the Mightyena's earshot, Fen turned to Ryu. "I had no idea Pokémon even had a currency!" he said, exasperated. "What are we supposed to do now? You knew this was coming, right? That we'd need money here?"

Ryu crossed his arms sulkily. "I'd heard about it," he muttered. "But money wasn't an issue when I grew up, because all the food and water we needed grew around us. This is a different kettle of 'Karp."

When Fen thought about the prospect of storms like yesterday's, his stomach turned in knots. "There's no way I'm sleeping outside," he said.

"And I'd be worried if you wanted to." Ryu looked ahead, and Fen did the same.

Sanguin Town looked to be a circular structure, with the path they walked leading into a town square of sorts. Most buildings looked like Pokémon houses to Fen. Their construction was rudimentary, built on solid wooden beams. More striking were the decorations adorning the houses; some seemed to be the home's inhabitants showing off, such as complex webs of leaves and vines that he assumed were the work of grass Pokémon. Another house seemed to be painted and designed in the shape of a Blastoise head, which, while he appreciated the uniqueness, could hardly be the most efficient construction. He noticed that the doors to most houses didn't have any sort of handles. *If these Pokémon don't have arms, I guess that's more convenient…*

What amazed him most was that this town existed at all. Unless he was mistaken, Pokémon, and solely them, had been responsible for everything built here. *A Pokémon town!*

As per his request, Ryu asked around for anywhere a couple of travellers with no money could stay. To Fen's surprise, they got directed to a long, blue and orange coloured building, which had the look of a hostel about it. A few Pokémon walked the dimly lit corridors inside.

Entering took them to a large hall, a few doorways leading off in front of them and a desk in the middle of the room, where a Pokémon was slumped over on a chair. On every wall, candles were lit inside holders shaped like a fire-lizard's mouth. Fen couldn't help being impressed by the feat of architecture.

The Pokémon in front stirred at their appearance and sat up, shaking its head as if to wake itself. It was a strange looking thing, primarily orange coloured with some cream markings on its face and arms. On top of its head were what looked like fins standing upwards, and it had a long, yellow band stretched over its shoulders.

She looked up at the approaching Pokémon and raised her energy. "Faoz's Lodgings," she announced. "Can I help?"

Ryu spoke nervously. "Hey Floatzel-"

"Please," the Floatzel cut him off. "Faoz. I *am* Faoz."

Ryu nodded a few times and started again. "Faoz, we need somewhere to stay the night, and we got directed here."

Faoz looked at them seriously for a second, then waved Ryu on.

" *Buuuut* we don't have any money at the moment, so I wondered…"

"If you could stay here for free?" Faoz sighed. "Yes, you're not alone in making such a request, and *yes,* I am fine with letting you sleep

here. *But-* " she said before Ryu could get another eager word in, "this is no ordinary lodgings you've just walked into. See, to pay your 'rent', you have to complete a job for us tomorrow."

"Huh?" Ryu looked confused. "It's like a trade between us?"

Faoz hummed approvingly. "Could call it that, yes. If you do that for me then, if needed, you can spend tomorrow night here, and if you do another job the next day, you can stay another night, and… you see how it goes. Of course, if you're fortunate enough to earn enough money from those jobs, you won't need to do any more of them, and you can pay us to stay here instead. Now, if you were observant, you would've noticed a bulletin board stuck on the wall behind me."

She gestured with a paw to where there was indeed such a board, a few scraps of paper still hanging off it. "Pokémon who need to deliver a letter, or need to transfer a shipment of items, or have lost something in a treacherous area; they post their problem up here, and you lucky souls get to take their missions on. That's what this place essentially is, in truth. You could call it… a guild, maybe? Heh, that's what everyone here calls it." She looked at them with interest.

"Not much of a lodging then," Fen said quietly.

Faoz laughed heartily. " *Technically* it still is a lodging, just a very… unconventional one. Also, included in the deal here is breakfast and dinner every day for free, if that's a potential deal-broker. So… do you still want a bed here?"

Fen and Ryu exchanged a glance. "Sure!" Ryu said. "This type of thing sounds pretty fun, don't ya think Fen? Doing jobs, helping Pokémon out?"

Fen looked at him doubtfully and shrugged. He couldn't see the logic in being asked, unless Ryu thought he was a good actor. "If we've got a place to stay, I'll take it," he muttered.

Faoz chuckled. "Good to have you on board. Now, for what room you can sleep in…" She moved to get up, then paused. "Sorry, just out of interest, did you come from Cheri Forest?"

"Oh… we passed through it, but neither of us live there," Ryu said.

Faoz nodded. "Quite the unusual storm there, from what I've heard. A few 'mon were hurt; I hope you weren't caught in the worst of it."

"We managed to find shelter okay."

"Ah, that's good. Follow me." Faoz led them down a leftward corridor, stopping at the nearest open doorway. She showed them inside. "Plenty of space in here. You'll get woken up in the morning, and I'll be around then to explain anything else, but it should be fairly simple."

"About that…" Ryu said. "Faoz, neither of us really have much sense of direction around Sanguin, or even Kyunn in general. I knew roughly how to get here, but of the island itself, I've hardly travelled anywhere. So…"

Faoz waved his question away, smiling. "Trust me, you're not the first. I'll make sure you know where you're going."

Ryu thanked her again, and they ventured into the room, candles already put out for the night. With Fen's tail as their sole illumination, a quick glance around revealed more Pokémon than he would have imagined. They were all lying on what looked like flat bundles of hay.

He looked at Ryu apprehensively, to gauge his reaction more than anything. Ryu just shrugged wearily. He didn't seem to mind the small, crowded space. He took off his bag and threw it down on an empty hay patch, next to where an Ivysaur and Luxio were sleeping especially snugly next to each other. Ryu gestured to Fen to take another hay patch beside him.

"You wanna huddle together?" Ryu asked once they were sitting down. "For warmth?"

Fen almost scoffed at this suggestion from someone he'd barely known two days. Then he reminded himself that Pokémon weren't the same as humans. "I'll be alright, but thanks for the offer," he said. He wasn't cold; it seemed the right thing to do. He was a little touched by the gesture, in truth.

Ryu shrugged and curled up. Fen looked around again at the mass of sleeping bodies surrounding him. He fought to hold himself together, amid the mass of negative emotions swamping his mind.

Maybe this won't be so bad… there's a safe place to stay here, as long as we can do whatever task Faoz gives us tomorrow. And I could ask if there's anyone in town who could help me recover my memories… that certainly sounds possible. Yeah, I'm sure I'll get answers if I just keep plugging away here… hopefully…

He tried to concentrate on just breathing for a few minutes, in the hopes that it would sufficiently calm him. After some time, he heard a rustling next to him. Ryu opened an eye to check him, then closed it again. "Get some sleep, Fen," he murmured. "Please. You'll feel better for it."

Fen said nothing, but acknowledged Ryu by curling up into the small space his hay bed gave. The position felt nice, actually. Much more comfortable than how he'd slept the first night. Eventually, mostly by virtue of plain exhaustion, he drifted off.

Conflict

Clack! Clack! Clack!

"MOOOORNING guild members! Morning! Get *up* !"

The high-pitched, slightly squeaky voice had no trouble piercing through Ryu's drowsiness.

He opened an eye and glanced at the figure in the doorway, who now rapped a fin on her arm against the wall for emphasis. It took a second to recognise the species out of water. *Buizel… so I guess it's a relative of Faoz… ugh, this is early.*

Most of the 'mon in the room were already making their way to the entrance. They all seemed used to this schedule, with many chatting excitedly, eager for whatever trials the day had in store. And then… there was the Chimchar lying next to Ryu.

"Fen…" Ryu muttered, giving him a gentle shake. "'Mon, get up already."

Fen moaned something in protest, and tried to roll away from Ryu's arm, but he pulled him around again, more forcefully.

"Fen! I know you're awake because your stupid tail's lit!" In his ear, he hissed, "You're the one who's supposed to be trying to find out how you got here! Now c'mon!"

Fen opened his eyes, unwilling to accept it was already morning. *Why didn't I think sleep would be so important to Pokémon?* he thought miserably. *Two days in and I'm already sleep-deprived to hell… I suppose the mental concentration I'm having to use just to learn how to function properly doesn't help…*

"I need an early night some time," he muttered.

"Mm." Ryu was unwilling to acknowledge any more.

They were last out of the room as Fen stumbled behind Ryu, attempting to rub some life into his oversized eyes. He wasn't sure how many Pokémon he expected in the guild, but was reassured that it didn't seem a huge operation. He counted 20 altogether, plus him and Ryu, who were queuing up against the wooden board that was rather inadequately sized for the attention it demanded. There were little slips of paper pinned up all over, but these were gradually cleared off by other groups or individuals. When at last they reached to the front, they were met by Faoz again.

"Glad to see you made it here, eventually," she said, smirking. "So, here are where all your jobs get listed. I ask everyone to give the location of their task, what exactly it entails, their own location, and the reward they're offering. Based on those I make a judgement on the 'difficulty' of the task. It's up to five stars, but in reality there's very few tasks that warrant more than three and, dare I say it, not many 'mon around here would be up to that challenge anyway. So keep that in mind when you're choosing jobs. Though since you're the last here, most of the hard work's been done for you." She gestured to the few scraps of paper left.

"Why's that?" Fen enquired, a little more awake. "That not many Pokémon living here can do the hardest missions?"

"Well…" Faoz frowned. "My theory would be that once most 'mon reach a very high level of competence, they prefer to go out on their own, exploring the world, rather than be kept locked in by this system of missions. There's quite a consistent turnover of 'mon in this place, at least in the short time I've been running it. Which I understand, but still, it's a shame they have to leave. That's Pokémon for you, I suppose. Always looking to be the best."

Fen looked at her curiously, which she seemed to pick up on, quickly continuing.

"Anyway, enough of that. Since you said you didn't know your way around Kyunn, I've got a little something that might be of use…"

She stuck her arm around the back of the board and produced a rolled-up sheet of card. Gesturing to them to open it, Ryu gasped as he did.

"This is… a map?" he said. "Oh Mew… it's amazing! I've never seen anything like this… did you draw all this?"

Faoz laughed. "I wish. A good friend of mine, a Smeargle, is the one to thank."

Though he didn't share all of Ryu's enthusiasm, Fen did find the map exciting in a way he couldn't explain. It was entirely hand-drawn, and painted with the most vibrant, sparkling set of colours. Every major location seemed to be illustrated with the type of terrain they occupied, whether that was trees and shrubbery or winding mountains. There were also recurring coloured markings all over the place; one that was a drawing of a flame, another of water droplets, another of green vines. There was a drawing of a big Floatzel head in the middle of the map, presumably to indicate Sanguin Town, but as he glanced up to check the name, he was met with a startling realization. With Faoz still lurking, he tried to conceal his shock, not wanting to attract attention.

Faoz explained that each place was marked with the type of Pokémon most commonly found in that area - the reason for the colour markings - and that the areas nearest Sanguin Town, where most missions took place, could be travelled to and from before dusk.

"I would normally give you a bag, but you seem to already have one…" She looked admiringly at Ryu's rucksack. "Quite a sturdy one, too. I'd keep hold of it. The other thing you'll need is this."

She handed them a round, wooden object with raised edges. Inside was a thin, metal arrow, pointing towards Faoz. Yet as Ryu turned it

in his paw, the arrow jerked slightly, and Fen realised with a jolt what he was looking at.

"This is a compass?" he asked Faoz.

Faoz raised her eyelids, and Ryu gave him a surprised glance. "Sure is," Faoz said. "You know how to use it?"

"I… yeah, I suppose."

"Well, your direction points are on the map as well," she said, pointing to the corner of it where more symbols were marked. "If that's the case, all you need now is to choose a mission from the board."

Fen couldn't remember ever relying on a compass for navigation, certainly not one so primitive-looking, but supposed it wouldn't be difficult. However, the symbols inscribed on it confirmed what the map had suggested to him, and as they looked at the board, filled with more symbols, he spoke in Ryu's ear.

"Ryu, I can't read this language at all! I've never seen these things before! Are they… footprints?"

Ryu chuckled quietly. "Footprint runes, yeah. It's fine, I can read 'em. Hey, look at this one!" He tore a scrap of paper off the board, which had a letter attached to the bottom. "Says this: 'Please deliver to my dearest friend in Voltaic Point, Piku - Raichu. Requested by Naks - Dedenne. Reward: 300 Poké. Two stars.' Voltaic Point is *here* on the coast, so going from our location… it should be easy enough to reach."

"Sounds alright, then," Fen said, though there wasn't much else he could do in his reliance.

Ryu carefully rolled the map up and slid it into his bag, along with the letter. "Thank you so much, Faoz!" he said delightedly. "We'll take good care of the map and, uh, that other thing."

"Wait, hold on," Fen cut in, before they dismissed themselves. "What happens if, say, we pass out on the journey there and can't get back?"

Faoz looked at him strangely, so he added, "If we don't return, is that it? We're just forgotten about?"

Faoz seemed to understand. She smiled reassuringly. "Well, it's highly unlikely that you should find yourself in a position where you physically can't get back here. If a wild knocks you out, then it'll just move on and you'll wake up slightly worse for wear. They're only concerned with fighting whatever's in their path." She paused. "That's the case for pretty much all lands north of here, where missions tend to be based. The south is… a slightly different story.

"Anyway, you might be in trouble if you lost your map, or got stuck in a swamp, or something… if you're gone an abnormally long time then, yes, I'll put a notice up that you're missing. But by that point you're reliant on some other 'mon or team to come and rescue you. I would just suggest you be cautious. Does that make sense?"

"Well… I guess so," Fen said, not completely satisfied.

Faoz smiled again. "See you later, then."

Once Fen and Ryu had breakfast and located the correct exit out of Sanguin Town, they found themselves wading in some long grass, not unlike that in Cheri Forest. Contrary to the mountain of yesterday (or "Mt. Horizon", as he learned it had been creatively named), Fen realised that he *really* didn't like the grass. Having to shove thick blades out of his face every two seconds was bad enough, but he felt vulnerable to attacks from any angle, from any Pokémon, if it knew where it was going. And his tail-flame, which left a singed-grass smell wherever they walked, was another matter entirely. It was a nice smell, though.

Ryu was holding the map, but Fen had doubts that he had much of an idea how to navigate it. Sadly, his own language barrier prevented him having any input on that front. He had given Ryu a quick tutorial on using a compass, hoping that the Riolu had listened.

"What's this place called?" Fen asked after a while.

"Map says it's 'Route 4'," Ryu mumbled.

"Route 4, that sounds… hm. Are there many routes marked on the map?"

"Eh, a few," Ryu rolled up the map and tucked it away with the compass. "We can expect some Commons and Flyers on this route, apparently. I'd try and listen out for any birdsongs as a warning."

Fen didn't see any fault in that logic, so agreed. *Commons and Flyers… Pokémon have some interesting slang.*

It wasn't a birdsong that they heard shortly after, but a rustling in the grass ahead. It was a strange rhythm, as if the source was senselessly leaping around from one spot to the next. Suddenly, Ryu spotted a couple of heads peeking out of the top of the grass, with tiny black eyes indicating no emotion. He quickly signalled for them to be still, and upon spotting them the Doduo also stopped, tilting both its heads slightly.

Then it yapped at them and lunged heads-first towards Ryu, mouth still open. To Fen's surprise, Ryu squealed in panic, and, not fast enough to twist himself away, cried out a second later as the bird pecked at his body.

Not trusting himself to produce a decent ember, Fen tried to get close enough to the Doduo to claw at it, and he partially succeeded without landing a hit, his swinging arms distracting it from Ryu. The bird cawed again, both its heads snapping in Fen's direction. He managed to backpedal enough to avoid the attacks.

"Wait!" Fen said forcefully, as Ryu looked set to try a scratch. He stopped, turning his head in bemusement. Fen himself was surprised at his voice's authority.

"Listen," he pointed at the Doduo, "this thing is a total idiot, but it moves too fast for us to hit. If I-"

Before he could finish, Ryu accelerated past him and tackled the Doduo full-on. It recoiled backwards and looked around frantically, as Ryu had disappeared into the grass. In its hesitation Fen swiped at it, but almost as soon as he did there was a *thud* from behind it. One of the Doduo's mouths opened impossibly wide, without a sound, and it made a few wayward steps before crashing forwards.

"… Oh. Sorry," Ryu said, chuckling as Fen struggled to force off the neck he had fallen under. "Hey, what were you saying just then?"

"Thanks for listening," Fen grumbled. "I just, uh… thought maybe if I distracted it, by waving my arms about or something, it would give you time to hit it properly. But I forgot you could just tackle it really fast." He sighed. "Does that attack have a name?"

"Quick attack, I s'pose," Ryu said, helping him up.

"Alright. Good job on beating the Doduo." A thought suddenly occurred to Fen. "Wouldn't it be easier if we coordinated our attacks a bit more? Most wilds seem to be on their own, so… it'd make sense."

Ryu looked at him sceptically. "Yeah, but… that's difficult right now."

"What? Why?"

"Well, you're so far behind me in ability, it's just… it would probably compromise me more than help us."

Fen wanted to laugh at the brute honesty, but Ryu's comment hurt more than he expected. "I need to get better, then?"

"Yeah! But… let me see… next time something appears, I've got an idea."

Only a few minutes later they heard a low-pitched squeaking. A pair of bright red eyes peeked out from inside the grass.

"Alright, a Rattata," Ryu said. "I'll attack first, but you should have a chance to follow up this time."

Fen nodded. He was getting used to this.

Ryu jogged briefly on the spot then flew into the Rattata. Though it recoiled, it stood firmer than the Doduo had. Then Fen ran up to it, breathing in as much as he could manage before exhaling. But the result was only a weak ember, barely singing the Rattata's front. In fact, it only seemed more riled; it snarled back at Fen before leaping forwards.

Fen yelped, turned his shoulder into the attack, but was still knocked off his feet. Annoyed, he leapt back up acrobatically, using his back legs as a springboard, and slashed at the Rattata's face with both hands. It hissed something in response, then whipped its tail to drive him back a little.

They faced off, a few metres apart from each other. Fen expected its next move would be to tackle him again, so dropped onto all fours and waited for signs of movement. Then, from just above its head, something purple caught his eye. It was the Rattata's tail again, doing a strange sort of dance in the air. He only focused on it briefly, but it was enough for the Rattata to catch him off-guard when it leapt up. He briefly lost sight of it before feeling the weight crash untidily on his back.

"Grrr… get off me!" he said, but then he heard by a *cha* sound, and two huge teeth sunk into his forearm.

The pain was startling. None of his cuts and bruises so far, it could compare something piercing into his body. Now it was his turn to

thrash about wildly, but the Rattata continued to clamp down on him. Eventually, with no other means of attack, he spun himself in circles, and after a few seconds heard his foe wince slightly and loosen its grip. The Rattata jumped off him and retreated to a safer distance.

Fen was confused and glad at the respite. As he readied his left arm for another scratch, he was met with more overwhelming pain. He cursed; he'd gone with his bitten arm without thinking, but it couldn't scratch now. And attempting to use just one arm would be almost useless. He'd have to try an ember. *Dammit!*

He tried to draw some fire into his mouth, but then the Rattata jumped at him again, headed towards his right arm this time. It was in the air, flying towards him just above head-height, and with his mouth already full he acted instinctively.

From point blank range, he spat his flames into the Rattata's face. It squealed in surprise and missed its trajectory, falling on the grass just behind him. Without hesitation, Fen pivoted and viciously slashed its body with his good arm, sending it rolling over a few times before it came to rest.

Fen gasped to catch his breath, slumping down in the grass. He glanced at his arm. There were two bloody gashes where the Rattata had bitten into him. He managed to draw a circle with it, wincing as he did so; at least nothing looked fractured. The Rattata had attacked more savagely than any Pokémon he'd faced yet, but it seemed to have brought out the vicious streak in him as well. He sighed.

Ryu strolled over to him, and once again offered an arm up. Fen slapped it away angrily, struggling to his feet alone. "Where'd you disappear to?" he demanded. "I thought we were a team! Why didn't you help?"

Ryu took a step back, a little startled, but a familiar smirk soon took over his face. "You've gotta improve somehow," he said. "I wanted to see how you'd do. It was a pretty close matchup, I thought."

"Yeah, but-" Fen pointed to his arm. "It bit me really hard! That hurts, you know!"

"Oh, you know why it hurts so much?" Ryu snapped. "Because while four-legs over there's got his teeth in your arm, you're flailing your limbs about like you're a fucking Machamp or something. Anyone with half a brain would realise that's just going to make the wound worse."

Fen huffed resentfully. "Sorry I don't have your level of bloody… fight training."

"Well, you should have more than you do!"

Fen looked at him in disbelief. "I wasn't just *born* into this world like you were!"

Ryu paused, then shook his head. "Y'know, you moan more than anyone I've ever met."

"Do you want to know why?!" Fen was almost screaming at him. "Do you have *any idea,* any at all, what this is like for me? No? So don't accuse me of doing something that *you* think's obvious, because it's not! I'm not like you! Maybe I look like a perfectly normal Chimchar to you, but… "

He trailed off, unsure what else to say. He was shaking. His raised emotions seemed to have alerted his battle instincts again, but he told them definitively that they weren't welcome.

Ryu looked to be considering his words carefully. Eventually, he took a seat in the grass facing him.

"Alright, I'm sorry." He looked Fen in the eye. "I'm sorry, okay? You're right. It can't be easy for you, trying to learn all this. I'll try and be more understanding."

Fen was quite stunned. He hoped Ryu had meant his words.

"You're serious?" Fen said.

"Yes!"

"Alright, well… it's my fault too. I know you're *trying* to help me, it's just hard to see that sometimes. Can you just… give me advice, but help me as well?"

"That sounds good. One condition, though," Ryu said, his smirk returning. "You stop moaning when something happens that you don't like."

"I think you're guilty of that as well."

Ryu laughed. "Okay, for my first lesson," he said with mock gravitas in his voice, "let me show you something."

He led Fen over to the fallen Rattata in the grass. It was still conscious, but its body only twitched weakly. Its eyes gazed at the two of them resentfully.

"Look at him," Ryu said. "You've just gone and torched his whole face, and left a slash in one of its ears."

It was crude, but Fen couldn't disagree with the description. The Rattata's ears and snout were particularly blackened. He felt horribly guilty.

"Now," Ryu went on, "I'm going to say that in a little while, he'll be back up on his feet and moving again. And in the same amount of time, your arm will be, maybe not entirely healed, but it won't hurt like it does now. I'm not sure what galaxy you're coming from Fen, but these injuries are really not that bad . You get them all the time! That's just how life is."

Easy for you to say, Fen thought, but knew better than to say it aloud. The shock of being bitten had provoked him more than the pain really warranted. He decided that, for the time being, he should

try and keep any conflict between him and Ryu to a minimum. So they moved on.

Some time later, Fen picked up a quiet padding of feet in the distance. Ryu seemed to hear it too, for he spoke immediately after.

"I think the idea last time was good, with my quick attack and you following up, but I've got another way for it to work."

"Oh? What's that?"

Ryu smirked. "It'd be better if I show you. Here's a welcome volunteer for us."

Walking towards them, not even trying to camouflage themselves, was a pink, bipedal figure. As it got nearer, Fen started to make out the rest of its strange features: white fluff covering its head and upper body, a blue orb sitting at the end of its tail, its arms and legs strangely tiny in proportion to its body size.

"Flaaffy," Ryu said. "An Electric, that's interesting. Didn't say anything about 'em on the map…"

He stopped walking, waiting for the Flaaffy to do something to signify battle. Instead, it did the last thing Fen expected.

"Hey!" she said brightly, holding up a paw in greeting. "Where are you two off to? Voltaic Point by any chance?"

Fen and Ryu both stood dumbstruck for a second. Fen noticed the Flaaffy had a small shoulder bag slung over its head. *I suppose it's only logical that there'd be civilised Pokémon on these routes too…*

Ryu dropped his head in disappointment. "We thought you were a wild."

"Uh, we are going to Voltaic Point, yeah," Fen added cheerfully, not wanting the Flaaffy to feel unwelcome.

She smiled, ignoring Ryu's comment. "Ah well, that's where I'm hatched from, you see. It's just a little further up the grass path here, you shouldn't be able to miss it. I'm Raffi, by the way."

Fen and Ryu introduced themselves, and Raffi went on.

"I'm curious, what brings a couple of travellers to our Electric home? Is it your first time there?"

"Well, we're not here for 'travelling', exactly…" Fen said. "We're delivering a letter to someone living there, for a client in Sanguin Town." He thought about her words again. "It's an Electric home? What do you mean?"

"Ah, yes," she nodded to his first point, then smiled. "Well, the air around the Point, and even here to some extent, as we're on the edge of the village; it attracts strong winds and plenty of thunder, for reasons I'm… not sure of, to be honest. But what that means is that the air is highly charged, more than any other place you'll find on Kyunn. We live on electricity, of course, so you can imagine that it's an ideal habitat for Electrics. It gets our fur sparkling!"

Fen was surprised. *I didn't even know air* could *be highly charged. It's ingenious, if it really does help 'Electrics'…*

"So… what does it mean more literally for your fur to be sparkling?" he asked.

She laughed. "Well, it *does* sparkle the more charged we are; I wasn't making that up. I suppose 'mon are just healthier and happier, and can produce stronger electrical attacks than they would elsewhere."

Ryu's ears seemed to prick up on hearing this. "Huh? Did you say your attacks are stronger? They get supercharged or something?"

"Not exactly supercharged…" Raffi said. "Not unless we get under a *real* lightning strike. But the power of our attacks is boosted slightly

due to the charged air."

"So… any way you could show us what you mean?" Ryu asked excitedly.

Raffi sighed. "You really wanted to fight me, didn't you?"

"Agh! I… well… yeah. Could you? With both of us?"

"Absolutely!" Raffi grinned, sparks of electricity suddenly flying from her white fleece. "I'd never want to turn down a fight with travellers."

She swung off her bag and laid it aside on the grass. Ryu looked uneasy, but he nonetheless did the same with his, putting it next to Raffi's bag.

Raffi got into a crouched position. "Ready?" she said.

Fen glanced at Ryu for guidance. He'd adopted the same martial arts pose he always did prior to fighting, arms out in front of him. Fen perched himself on all fours, used to the feeling now.

"Watch this…" Ryu whispered to him, before immediately turning back to Raffi and shouting "Go!" He leaped towards her, shaping to strike with his left arm, but he pulled it away at the last second. Raffi instinctively moved out of the way in anticipation, but as Ryu sailed past she looked round, confused at his disappearance.

Now Fen saw what Ryu meant. By faking an attack, Ryu disorientated the opponent, which gave scope for Fen or him to get a free attack off. *He could've just told me what he was doing, though…*

With his decent arm he slashed at Raffi's belly - the area her woolly fur didn't cover. The Flaaffy grunted in pain but barely moved from her position. Then there was a much stronger *whack* as Ryu's glowing paw slammed into the unprotected area on her back. He'd explained the attack to Fen; transferring energy into his paw gave him more power than a simple punch, but also required more

concentration. The 'force palm', as he called it, made Raffi swing her tail in a circle, which forced them back. She had still barely moved herself.

Then her features tensed, and sparks started gathering on her fur. But it was a slow process; she was vulnerable. Feeling confident, Fen started approaching for another scratch, but found… he couldn't. His feet seemed frozen to the ground. It was a familiar feeling, but… where from?

Then he remembered. Fighting the Shroomish in Cheri Forest, when it had sent those spores into the air… so he was paralysed?

But… she hasn't done anything! he thought, dismayed. *All I did was hit her… is that all it took to paralyse me?*

He could still move his eyes, and managed to seek out Ryu in the corner of his vision, who looked to be suffering the same problem. Raffi's static had grown into a sizzling ball of electricity now, contained just in front of her hands. Ryu managed to lose his electric handcuffs first, but as he tried to attack again, the electricity ball engulfed Raffi, and she released it in a horizontal lightning bolt, striking Ryu full on.

"Ryu!" Fen cried. He thought he was going to follow that up with a shout of "hey!" at Raffi, but instead what came out was his own screech of a cry that sounded slightly more threatening. He didn't like the sound, but it at least seemed to break him out of paralysis. He hurriedly shook some feeling back into his arms.

Ryu was on the ground; his smoking fur was standing at funny angles, and he didn't look up to fight again. Fen gulped; he was on his own. Did he have any chance now?

What did he know about Raffi? She was slow. But his scratches had paralysed him. He would have to use fire, and hit her fast enough so she couldn't charge up another electricity ball. Would that work? He'd have to try.

He got in range for an ember, then fired just as he saw her prepare an electric blast. She winced but continued charging. He started galloping in a circle around her, hoping it would reduce her accuracy. When she threw a ball of electricity it was just behind him, and he felt the electricity singe his tail flame slightly as he dove forwards.

Phew! He scrambled to his feet. Raffi was *still* unmoved from her spot on the grass. As he started running again, something strange started happening to the woolly fleece around her head. It expanded briefly, then little spheres broke off it. She flicked her head in Fen's direction, and the cotton spores shot over and wrapped themselves around him.

He tried to keep running, but the spores weighed him down far more than he expected. It was like running through treacle. He tried pulling off the spores, then realised burning them with fire would be easier. But he wasn't able to try before Raffi tackled him to the floor.

He doubted she was the heaviest 'mon, but she hit him right in the stomach. He coughed out a few smoke plumes as he tried to regain his breath, noting that as something he would have to look into another time.

While he was down, his opponent had charged herself yet again, and this time made no mistake with her aim. The bolt of electricity hit him.

The best way he could describe it would be that all his muscles contracted simultaneously, as if they were getting tensed for something, but to an unfeasible level that rendered him immobile. It was similar to paralysis, but that was only a side-effect of the pain. His limbs refused to cooperate further.

As he panted for breath he guessed that, being a civilised 'mon, Raffi knew to stop attacking when the fight was over. He was glad for it, but the ruthlessness with which she'd despatched both him and Ryu suggested she wasn't holding back by much. He wondered how well Ryu would take the defeat.

Raffi offered him a hand up, which he carefully accepted, making sure his legs were working. She went to do the same with Ryu, who gazed at her almost mystically.

"Hey… you're pretty strong," he said, grimacing. "All that small talk put me off guard."

Raffi chuckled; her battle demeanour entirely removed. "Are you both alright?" she asked, frowning. "I hope I wasn't too heavy on you. There's still a fair little journey to get where you need to…"

"No… we're fine," Ryu muttered. "Right Fen?"

"Yeah… could we take a couple of minutes, though?"

Raffi gave him a puzzled glance, which puzzled Fen just as much. But then Ryu said, "Alright, we'll have a rest," and it disappeared.

Ryu shot him a look and mouthed, 'minute?' Understanding, Fen suppressed a groan. *I've got to stop talking like a human…*

Raffi looked at them pitifully, then fished in her bag until she pulled out a round, blue berry. "Here, this'll help. A way of expressing my gratitude."

She extended to them, and in a rapid shift of mood, Ryu grabbed it excitedly, breaking it in half for Fen. Fen looked sceptically at the berry. It looked vaguely familiar as something Pokémon were fed.

Ryu caught his look and smiled gleefully. "Trust me, these things are good. Just give it a try."

Fen took a cautious bite. The flavour was pleasant enough, an interesting mix of spice, sweetness and sourness. The impact on his body, though, was extraordinary, and entirely unexpected. His aches from past battles declined rapidly, so he ate more, and by the end he felt revitalised and positively bouncing with energy. Even his arm felt,

if not as good as new, certainly well enough to fight with. Ryu was doing his best not to laugh at the reaction.

"Oran berries," he said. "Good stuff, right?"

Fen shook his head in joyous disbelief. "What have I been eating for my entire life…? How… how is this possible?"

Ryu shrugged. "Dunno, but I'm glad it is."

After he was done licking the berry juice from his hands, Fen thanked Raffi profusely for the gift. She found his amazement quite amusing too. After she gave them rough directions for Voltaic Point, pointing out that it *should* be very simple to reach anyway, they parted ways again.

The long grass gradually began to thin out, and the ground moved to an upwards incline. They spotted a sign ahead, which Ryu translated.

"'Voltaic Point ahead. Beware of lightning.'"

Next to the sign were some rough steps carved into the rock, uneven and cracked after many years of use. The steps led into a delicately carved trail through the mountain itself, until this gave way to a smooth, grassy surface again.

Voltaic Point was a rather small village, set in a hilly plain. Most of the few houses around were decorated in yellow, some with additional lightning bolt-esque patterns on the exterior.

"This is Voltaic Point?" Fen said. "Odd place to have a village, right next to a cliff. And the ground isn't even very flat."

"Probably 'cause of that charged air," Ryu remarked.

"Oh." Fen felt foolish. "Of course."

"Well, we just need to find this Raichu now. You know what they look like?"

Fen tried to visualise it. "Orange colour, two arms and legs, big tail?"

Ryu chuckled. "Good description. I've seen 'em a couple times before, was just testing."

Asking an Ampharos at the nearest house took them to a fairly standard, yellow-and-white coloured building, where they found Piku, who was both delighted and surprised to learn of Naks the Dedenne's letter to her. When asking where they were from, she jumped at their response.

"But Sanguin Town is such a long way!" she exclaimed, little sparks of electricity flying off her as she gesticulated. "Really, Naks should've come to meet me herself, if you had to go to so much trouble. But thanks!"

They chatted with Piku at the door for a bit about the journey there, and then she asked them if they'd ever been to the village before. Both of them shook their heads.

"Ah, well then." She smiled knowingly. "I ought to let you in on why this village was built here."

"Oh, a Flaaffy we met explained that," Ryu said. "Stuff about the air, right?"

Piku nodded. "What about the Point itself?"

The pair exchanged a blank look. "I don't know what you mean," Ryu said. "Oh! Raffi mentioned something about absorbing the power of a lightning strike… is it anything to do with that?"

Piku's eyes seemed to light up. She walked outside and looked towards the sky. "Basically, the Point is wherever the very strongest electrical charge is coming from. If you're an Electric 'mon and you're

there at the right time, when there's storm clouds in the air, as there are now… well, let me show you. Come on!"

She skipped past the houses to an area right at the edge of the cliff, where high rocks were rooted in the ground. Leaping onto one, she turned in a circle, and seemed to flex her giant ears, searching for a sound Fen was unaware of. Finally, she turned to face them again.

"This is about it," she said. "The Point doesn't always stay in the same place; right now, the strongest signal is coming from around here." She grinned excitably. "Now stay back! Hopefully this won't take long."

They retreated to behind a sturdy looking rock about 50 metres from Piku's spot, then waited. All they could see from the Raichu was a look of intense concentration. Then suddenly, there was a rumbling. Thunder. Piku's head snapped up to the sky, where storm clouds were suddenly swirling. A second later, lightning struck where she was standing.

After Fen uncovered his eyes from the initial light, he saw with astonishment that Piku was on all fours, wrestling with a lightning bolt in her arms. The lightning sizzled with energy and seemed to be doing the same to her body, with her tail flicking about wildly with the effort.

Finally, the lightning vanished. Only Piku was on the rock again, but even from their distance away they could see her fur glowing with energy. She beckoned them over again.

"Phew! That was bigger than I expected." Her voice carried some extra low frequencies.

She hopped off the rock and started scrambling on all fours towards the sea. "This is the best bit!" she called. "Make sure you get a good view!"

The water was choppy in the winds, but she found a rock a fair way out that was tall enough not to be submerged. Ryu climbed down near the base of the cliff, and Fen intended to follow, but as he descended he felt a strange resistance. It couldn't be anything physical; they were shielded from the wind at this angle, and there was nothing blocking him. As he willed himself to drop nearer the water, another part of him was instinctively trying to pull away. He sighed in exasperation.

He dropped down again and glared at the sea in an attempt to scare off whatever this resistance was. To his surprise though, that feeling of anxiousness jumped back up at him with twice the ferocity as before. He gasped at the explosion of emotion, and did all he could not to whimper in fear as he clutched onto the rock face tighter.

Does this mean… I'm afraid of the sea now? How stupid… like I'm ever going to fall in from here. But if I did, what would happen? Would I be able to swim? Would my tail go out completely? Would that mean-

An ear-splitting *crack* sounded above him, and he saw Piku's body engulfed in crackling electricity. She roared something to no one in particular, then another crack. Finally, her electricity seemed to converge with the thunderheads in the sky; it created a huge, vertical thunderbolt that crashed into the sea ahead of them. Waves and a few unlucky fish were sent flying.

Fen instinctively held up an arm to shield himself, even though the water was a long way away. Then he heard Ryu shout "Mew!" from below and put his arm down, wondering what had provoked him.

The thunder had turned the sky around them a shade of yellow, acting almost like an artificial sun. The brightness reflected on the water, creating an almost dream-like mesh of blue and yellow hues, in perfect view of their sight. Even the part of Fen that feared the sea seemed content enough to observe the beauty of it for a few seconds.

I've had this feeling before, he thought. *The kind of natural beauty that exists on this island, Kyunn… it's amazing. It makes sense that Pokémon like it here…*

Once the light show faded, he hurriedly pulled himself back to the top of the cliff. Ryu and a slightly staggering Piku re-joined him.

"I've never seen anything like that before," Ryu said to Piku. "I didn't even know you could *do* that with water and lightning! It's crazy!"

"Heh… that's why you were lucky to have come today," Piku said, panting a little. "The skies recently have been really volatile. When I looked out of the window, I knew I had to show you. Think of it as my way of thanks for you coming so far."

"I just have a question though," Fen said. "Why did you have to discharge all that energy so quickly? I mean, you're not glowing like you were just before. Isn't that a bad thing?"

Piku looked at him curiously, then nodded. "If we're too highly charged, it can be hard to keep our emotions in check, what with the over-abundance of energy we're carrying. As nice as it looks," she smiled, "it makes sense to discharge it, as you say. Makes for a nice view, though?"

Fen and Ryu could agree on that.

After some more thanks from both parties, they began the considerable journey back to Sanguin Town. The day had given Fen much to contemplate. He hadn't counted on having a fear of the sea, but he supposed it did make sense given his biology, as much as it irked him. He hoped that it wouldn't act as a hindrance to whatever lay in store in the future. That aside, if there were more sights like what they'd seen from Piku today, the future was looking like a more bearable prospect after all.

Assistance

After their mission they arrived back in Sanguin Town in the late evening, where dusk was just beginning to fall. Fen thought it lucky that their journey back had been more battle-free than the one towards Voltaic Point, but he was finally beginning to feel fatigue setting in.

When they arrived, his attention was immediately caught by a Quilava that was lighting torches around town which functioned like streetlights. Compared to his own fire-breathing struggles, he was amazed at the control she had over her power, breathing out just enough of a puff to light each candle, and showing no signs of tiredness in the process.

He considered if it was worth asking her for advice. *Are Pokémon even conscious of how they use their abilities?* he pondered. *I've never asked Ryu how he learnt all of his moves. Still, I could probably learn a few things from her…*

He was more entranced in the Quilava's performance than he realised, judging by the impatient nudge Ryu gave him towards the guild. They still had a mission to report, after all. When they entered, instead of Faoz sitting at the main desk there was a Buizel, who was perched up on a chair to try and make up for her lack of height.

"Heya!" she said as they approached. "Got a completed mission for us?"

"Hey… you're the one who woke us up," Ryu murmured.

"You remember me!" She smiled boyishly. "I'm Buin. I help out a bit here whenever mum's out swimming."

She goes swimming? Fen supposed that a water Pokémon would want to spend some time in their element, but it seemed a tad

impractical for business. He decided not to question it.

Ryu pulled out the completed mission slip they had. They'd visited Naks on the outskirts of town with the news, and a little note of Piku's own that she'd hurriedly put together. Naks had then dipped one of her paws in a small pot of ink, and 'stamped' it on their mission slip to indicate, apparently, that it was complete.

She had handed over the 300 Poké to them in the form of three gold coins. It was a material Fen didn't recognise, and he was impressed that the Pokémon of the island seemed to have had developed their own currency. And while he couldn't read the inscriptions on the coins, numbers at least were a medium he understood.

Buin murmured approvingly, and with her own ink drew something resembling a tick on a piece of card she had on the table.

"Great! Now, you got 300 Poké, so… that's 150 for the guild, and the other half for you to keep!"

"Wait, what?!" Ryu withdrew his hand abruptly from Buin's outstretched paw. "We don't get to keep this?! It's ours!"

The Buizel sighed like she'd heard something similar before. "Sorry, but it's the rules. Mum says we need the money to keep everything here running."

Ryu slowly reached his arm out, but didn't hand the money over. He looked torn over what to do.

"Ryu, just give her the money," Fen said tiredly. "Did you really think we'd get to keep it all? We're getting beds, food, plus the map and compass all for free here; it only makes sense that they'd need a share of what we earn in return."

Ryu shot him with an irritated look in response. "Hey, I like you!" Buin giggled to Fen.

"I just never considered that we wouldn't keep it…" Ryu grumbled, as he finally handed the coins over. Buin grinned gleefully, then rummaged in a pouch before pulling out five smaller, silver coins. With one of the 100 Poké coins, she passed their half back. "There ya go. Oh, and if it's your first day, you're meant to have one of these too…" She gave them a small, rugged looking purse, which Ryu slid the coins into.

"Thanks," he muttered grudgingly. "Dinner still going?"

Buin peered into the canteen to their right, which had a few Pokémon dotted around. "Ya, you're not too late."

"Aight." Ryu led him and Fen inside.

The eating arrangement was pretty simple. They lined up in the canteen, got a tray with a cup of water and whatever food the chefs had concocted, and that was it. There were two long tables set out with benches either side; one at a more accommodating height for those like Fen that struggled to reach three feet, and the other a couple of feet higher. There were some Pokémon who found it more convenient to not sit at a table at all, so there was plenty of space in the corners of the room too. It was late now though, and the place was almost deserted

Fen picked up their tray from a Delibird, who appeared to be the head chef, and took it to a space on the lower table. As in the morning, he contemplated how exactly he was supposed to eat the strange mush in front of him. Then, he had seen the Pokémon around him stick their heads into their bowls with no regard for how they might look, or how much of a mess they'd make. He looked across the table to see Ryu already employing that strategy, leaning the bowl up to his mouth with one hand. Cutlery didn't exist here.

Fen sighed. He knew this was what he was *supposed* to do, but he couldn't bring himself to it. To compromise he picked up some food in one hand and ate off that, like candy floss. He couldn't fault the

quality of food, though; whatever they were cooking up, on both occasions he had eaten it had been delicious.

"So, this money we've got," he said to Ryu. "What can you do with it exactly? What do Pokémon buy?"

Ryu smirked. "Well, as I said before, where I lived there was plenty of food to find in the mountains and below. I've never had any money until now."

"Is… that why you didn't want it taken away?"

"Yeah, probably." Ryu shrugged. "We can check out the town tomorrow if we're not out for as long. What would *humans* buy, anyway?"

He said it so casually that Fen instinctively glanced around the room, but no one was paying them any attention. Lowering his voice, he said, "If you don't know what a human is, it's difficult to explain some of these things to you. Like clothing. Pokémon don't wear any as far as I can see, but it's a basic requirement of humans really, to cover yourself. That can cost a lot of money."

"Why's that?"

"Huh?"

"Why do they need to cover themselves?"

"Uh… modesty? And depending on the weather, they'd need more clothes to stop themselves getting cold."

"They'd get cold?!" Ryu exclaimed. "Pfft, that's the weakest reason ever. They can't even keep warm? I'm not convinced by these humans."

Fen couldn't think of a good rebuttal to that. He was glad that Ryu had at least accepted the modesty reason without argument.

On the way back through the guild's entrance, they caught Faoz's eye, now back in her familiar role at the admin desk. "Ah, good to see you two again!" she said, smiling. "I take it the mission was a success?"

"Yeah, at least until it got to the money side," Ryu said bitterly. Fen gave him an elbow in annoyance.

"It was fine, thanks," he said to Faoz.

Faoz nodded. "Are you staying another night here?"

The thought hadn't even crossed Fen's mind; he'd already taken this place to be his temporary home. He exchanged a look with Ryu, who shrugged as if to say: *what else can we do?*

"I guess so," Fen said, and so Faoz wished them goodnight.

As they returned to their room, Fen felt more appreciative towards his hay bed than he had the first night. It was more comfortable than it looked, and it definitely beat sleeping outside. He wondered if he would enjoy a real, human bed as much now. *Though wouldn't I just burn through it? I'd have to lie on my front all night…*

With those thoughts, he began drifting off to sleep. Though he was hopeful of an adequate amount of rest for once, this wouldn't be the night for it.

Fen was not aware of anything prior to the tremors, if anything had preceded them. All he knew was that suddenly, the room was swaying from side to side, the light fittings on the walls shaking wildly. Everyone around him was awake, the room a frenzy of confused shouting.

"What… what?!" Fen's breath caught as he tried to speak. *This trembling… is it an earthquake? How…?*

Whatever it was, he felt an awful, overwhelming sense of panic at the tremors, irrationally so. He looked desperately for something to hold onto, but the floor of the room was bare asides from the hay beds - and they wouldn't be any use. In the darkness, his tail flame only offered the smallest light, which hardly helped his vision. He saw Ryu curled into a ball to protect himself, but he had no desire to do the same.

Then out of nowhere, a single grass vine appeared in front of him. Trying to find the source, he found an Ivysaur standing bravely behind him, with one other vine coming out of the bud on its back. Fen's ears didn't seem to be functioning properly, but he saw the Ivysaur open his mouth and appear to utter just two words: " *Take it!* "

Without hesitating Fen grabbed the vine, and at once felt a little calmer, though he had to pull hard on it to keep his grip. Worried he might be overexerting the Ivysaur, he glanced back at him again, and saw he was straining, but he had a fierce determination in his eyes. It was no use trying to speak, so Fen mouthed a "Thank you!" back at him.

After what felt like hours, and after a couple of unlit torches in the room had crashed to the ground, the tremors and rumbling finally began to cease. In the dim light that remained, Fen saw with some surprise that most of the Pokémon had formed an uneven circle around him. Fortunately, the Ivysaur answered his question unintentionally.

"Good thing you've got that tail of yours, Chimchar," he said, panting a little. Fen realised that he was still tightly holding his vine, and hurriedly let it go.

"Sorry! I…" he faltered. "Just, thank you… I really needed that, um…?"

"Savi." The Ivysaur shrugged it off shyly. "It's fine. Got these vines for a reason."

Fen introduced himself, then hesitantly offered his most pressing question. "Savi, do you know what that was, exactly? An earthquake?"

Savi looked equally concerned. "I've never experienced anything like it. I've felt an earthquake in battle before, only once, granted, but it didn't feel anything like that. It felt too… *deep,* somehow. It's hard to explain."

Ryu sitting up again now looking a little shaky, and he glanced at Fen, nodding to confirm they were both okay. Next to Savi, a Luxio he had been with groaned from the floor. He was still holding one of the vines.

"Lucxa?" Savi said, looking concerned.

The Luxio looked up at them with a pained expression. He growled something that sounded like a whine, and slumped his head down again, unwilling to move.

"Earthquakes are especially bad for 'mon like Luxio," Savi muttered sadly. "How're you feeling, Fen?"

"Well…" He was shivering for some unknown reason, certainly not from cold, but that aside his emotions felt stable again. "It was bad, but I'll survive." Ryu and Savi murmured agreement.

They chatted a little more, but mostly sat in an anxious silence, waiting for something to happen. Fen felt too shaken to consider sleep, despite dawn being still yet to break. After a while, Buin appeared in the doorway, looking as frightened as anyone. "You should come outside," she said simply, then said the same to the room next door.

There was quickly a rush of bodies hurrying out, and the torches usually reserved for evenings had already been lit, in the lack of daylight.

The damage the earthquake had caused looked significant, but not fatal. Roofs and ceilings on some of the more poorly designed houses had fallen in, or in a few cases been entirely reduced to rubble and splinters. The hardened mud that functioned as paths had been cracked in places. Some 'mon were outside homes looking startled, but most had joined the rest of the crowd towards a makeshift town square - it was large enough for everyone to fit, and largely free of debris. In the centre of the square, Faoz was in intense conversation with a Furret, who looked rather more laid back about events, and a Marowak, who repeatedly tapped his bone on the ground when he spoke.

"I don't see why we should take more precautions when this is the first occasion, in all my time here, that we've had any earthquake like this," the Furret was saying.

"Yes, but who's to say it won't happen again?" Faoz said irritably. "With an event as unknown to our lands as this, surely it would make sense to take a cautious view on the future. The storm three days ago was unexpected as well, even if it had died down once it reached here."

"If we should agree on one thing, let's make sure the town is at least back in working order," the Marowak asserted. "Then we should get Taluk's view on things. Whether he'll have anything to suggest, who knows."

The Furret nodded approvingly. "I think that's a good course of action," he said. "Faoz, what do you say?"

Faoz sighed. She lifted her gaze up towards the guildmembers' crowd Fen was part of, then turned back to the Furret and Marowak. "Very well. Stowk, get the builders organised. I can get the guild to help you out. And find as many Grounds like yourself to investigate these tremors, see if other towns were hit as badly."

Stowk murmured something in agreement, then barked out some semi-intelligible orders to the Machoke, who followed after him

towards a damaged area of town.

Faoz turned to address the guild. "Needless to say, normal missions are suspended for today," she said, looking disgruntled. "Those of you who can, help Stowk's team with repairing the mess. Those of you who can't…" she shrugged. "Make yourselves useful. That's all."

As they started following Stowk's group, Fen turned to ask, "Savi, who were those Pokémon Faoz was talking to?" When no answer came, he looked over. The Ivysaur was nowhere to be seen. He glanced around the crowd of 'mon, confused, but he had vanished.

A Croconaw walking beside him had apparently heard his question, though. "The Furret's called Ferri, he's the mayor of town. The Marowak is just the boss of those Machoke builders, and I guess the fact he's a Ground helps when we've just had an earthquake."

"Oh, thanks," Fen said. "What about who they were talking about, Taluk?

"Electabuzz. He runs the security around here," the Croconaw explained. "But he didn't show up just now. Probably something to do with being an Electric in the earthquake. Hopefully he's alright."

Ryu was still beside him, and they soon reached a site where a couple of Machoke were busy relaying instructions to a ramshackle group of 'mon like themselves. Fen noted that they were, more or less, all bipedal. *I almost forgot that not all Pokémon have arms; I guess Savi wouldn't be much use here… but even so, I don't understand why he would have left me so abruptly! Maybe I just wasn't paying attention…*

"Aight, you two!" A Machoke suddenly snapped at Fen and Ryu. "Think ya could fetch us some wood for construction?"

"Uh, where's best boss?" Ryu asked back.

"From the woodland just out town," the Machoke said. "It's easy to get to, just head outta the exit left of here. Yous gonna need summit' to chop it down?"

Ryu hesitated, and without waiting for a reply, the Machoke chucked him an axe small enough for him to handle, then followed it up with a huge paper bag. "'ere. Fit in as much as ya can," he barked at them. "Try an' be quick about it too."

"Sure thing," Ryu said, and Fen nodded in conformation, feeling a little intimidated standing against the Machoke's huge muscles. His puny height didn't help.

As they headed off on the Machoke's direction, he asked Ryu: "Why'd you call him 'boss'?"

Ryu shrugged. "Gotta speak their language, boss." Fen looked at him scornfully, to which he laughed, and added: "What I mean is, different 'mon have different ways of saying their words. Some try'ta say 'em like this," he said, putting on the Machoke's voice. "Some speak more properly. It's not a big deal, can just make things easier if you follow the way they talk. I've met a few Machoke before."

"Huh, humans have accents and dialects as well," Fen said. "Never thought they would apply to Pokémon."

They reached the woodland described, and Ryu got to work on mining the wood. Fen wasn't sure how much use the axe would be, given it was comparatively tiny compared to the trees that loomed above them. It only looked to be made of wood itself, though the head was reinforced with some metal.

As soon as Ryu started he realised, not for the first time, that he had sorely underrated Pokémon. Ryu's unconventional technique was to hurl himself towards a tree trunk, then slam the axe into it at the very last moment. It generated enough power to knock most of the trees down in two swipes, but it was tiring work, too, especially since the wood needed to be chopped up some more to fit it in the bag. Fen

was in charge of picking up the pieces and loading them in, which he thought was the long end of the stick until it came to hauling the wood back into town.

At least no one's going to try and bite my arm off today, he thought.

The wood gathering had been time-consuming, and it was mid-afternoon by the time they finally got back to the group of Machoke. The fighting-type Pokémon showed no signs of physical fatigue, and seemed to relish physical labour just as much as some of the less-built Pokémon helping clearly despised it. With a number of hands already at work, and working much faster than Fen could see themselves doing, they were given the rest of the day off.

The two of them were taking a break on some steps, when Fen noticed the Quilava he'd seen the day before sitting just across from them. She was chatting casually with a Charmeleon and a Growlithe. He felt compelled to ask her about how she had controlled her fire yesterday lighting the torches, but he hesitated when about to do so.

Wait, how do I know it's the same Quilava? Wouldn't another Quilava look almost identical?

He knew though that somehow, it *was* the same one. *Maybe it's her scent or something, or my Chimchar brain can just differentiate better between the same species… oh well. Instincts, my life is in your hands.*

"Hey, I'm just gonna talk to someone for a sec," he said to Ryu, who raised his eyebrows in response, before noticing the Quilava he was indicating.

"Good luck," he smiled wryly.

Fen ambled over to them, doing his best to look natural. The Pokémon fell silent as he approached.

"Excuse me, Quilava," he began, remembering how Ryu had addressed other Pokémon simply by their species name. "I happened to see you last night lighting the torches in the town, and I just thought your control of fire was, well, really amazing! So I wondered if…"

She muttered something to her friends, then got up on two feet and motioned to him to move a bit away to somewhere more private. Confused, he did so, then she spoke.

"Chimchar, are you trying to ask me out?"

He froze, mouth open. It took him a few seconds for him to formulate any words.

"I… no!" he exclaimed. He felt his face heat up. "I was just going to ask for some help… why would you… that wasn't what I meant at all…"

He turned away from the Quilava and started walking away, eager to forget this last minute of his life. What was he thinking, anyway? As if asking a random stranger for help would really lead to-

A flash of white out of the corner of his eye, and then an arm on his shoulder almost made him jump in surprise. He turned around sceptically, but saw the Quilava looking apologetic.

"What?" he asked reluctantly.

"Hey, uh…" the Quilava chuckled awkwardly. "Is it alright if we start again? I'm Cyan." She breathed a small puff of fire into the air.

"I'm… Fen?" he said. Cyan looked expectantly at him. "Are you expecting me to do that too…? What was I just asking for help about?"

Cyan scratched the back of her head, a little taken aback. "Right. I see." She straightened up. "Sorry about a moment ago. It's been a

difficult day… I've been up since before dawn, and you know what it's like when you're sleep deprived."

"I do."

"I made an assumption, but I can see now that you're just looking for help."

"Yeah, I was," Fen murmured, still not wholly won over. "Can you help me then?"

"I'd like to try at least. But we should head somewhere quieter where we won't disturb anyone. Just… follow me a moment."

As they walked, Fen couldn't help contemplating on the exchange with Cyan. He had never entertained any thoughts of romance in the short time he'd been living here, and was conflicted on how he felt about it now.

I suppose… it's confusing, being a human and Pokémon at the same time, he thought. *It's obvious why Cyan came to the conclusion she did, because that's exactly how I was acting. But was I actually thinking of that at the time? I mean, she is quite pretty, but-*

No, what's wrong with me?! I'm supposed to trying to defend myself better, not think about romance! I've got enough to worry about as it is…

Her voice shook him awake from his daydreams.

"You said your name was Fen?"

"That's right," he said.

"I'm just wondering if that's a reference to your later forms? Mon *fern* o, In *fern* ape…?"

"Uh, nothing that interesting, sorry," he replied. "It's just my name." But he thought it a rather strange coincidence how his name might

have related to the species. *It is coincidence, surely?*

"Fair enough," she said. "We have our different naming conventions, after all."

To me they all just seem like mashed-up versions of your species names, but okay.

"Have you lived here long?" she asked.

"No, only arrived a couple of days ago. We've been staying at Faoz's place."

"Ah yes," she smiled. "I used to light the torches there too. Faoz is a great Pokémon, we're lucky to have her."

Sanguin Town had a main street that ran through the centre of the town, but beyond that there was little evidence that it had been designed to accommodate so many Pokémon. Alleyways spun all over the place, creating a maze of houses and huts. Fen was glad he had Cyan to guide him, as she led him through a few twists and turns before stopping at a house that was coloured yellow and red, with a peculiar jagged design around the edges.

"Our house," Cyan announced. "Live here with my two brothers and sister. They should all be out at this time, though."

Fen recognised then that the jagged edges represented the way Cyan's body projected fire off her back. He ran his hand down the house's surface curiously; it wasn't made of wood like most of the houses he'd come across so far. He asked Cyan what it was made of.

"Fire clay. Can't be living in a wooden house if you're a Fire 'mon, you see. Need something that won't burn down easily."

"Interesting…" he mused. "But then why aren't all the houses in the town made of clay? It's much sturdier, isn't it?"

"Yes, but clay is harder to sculpt, plus wood is usually still sturdy enough for this climate… with the exception of this morning." She looked at him oddly, and joked, "Are you an aspiring architect or what?"

"Heh… I'm just curious," Fen replied nervously, not wanting to act unusual. *Though, learning about Pokémon culture has probably been the best thing to come out of this weird experience so far, even if it is a little daunting…*

She led him inside, swiftly moving through an open living area and then down a set of stairs into a circular basement underground.

"We sleep down here, but it's a good space for sparring too," she explained.

Fen looked around. There were some hay bedrolls laid out on the floor, which Cyan tossed into one corner, but it was otherwise barely decorated.

"Don't you find sleeping down here a bit… uncomfortable?" he asked. "Maybe it's just me…"

"It certainly is you," she grinned. "The underground is the opposite of where you were born and raised, right? So, it's only natural that you would find it a bit unsettling. Sorry, if you wanted to go somewhere else…"

"It's fine," he said quickly. "It's nothing really."

Cyan nodded, satisfied. "So, what did you want some advice on?"

Fen thought about it for a second. "I guess… I'm really bad at fighting generally. Practically a newbie. I've used fire a few times, but it's usually been pretty weak and not very accurate. So… could you help with that, first?"

She considered this for a second. "You're very humble," she remarked.

"Huh?" he asked, surprised.

"Most 'mon I've met, especially Fires, always want to big themselves up about how strong they are. They don't tend to be so… negative about their abilities." She laughed. "Anyway, that's beside the point. I can help you, absolutely! You know how breathing fire works, right?"

"Well… not really," he admitted. "I can just kind of feel it in my throat, and then I just breath in and exhale as much as I can. Which isn't much anyway."

"Mm," She nodded. "Do you know where your fire comes from?"

Fen paused, then shook his head.

"In your stomach," she said, gesturing to that area on herself, "there's a burning gas that lights itself whenever you're awake. We call it your inner flame. This is what lights your tail, or for me, lights the spores on my back. It's closely linked with your lungs and throat, since you obviously need that to breathe fire.

"You should be aware that, because it's linked to your stomach, the strength of your fire and your physical strength are closely linked. If you try breathing fire on an empty stomach, you're going to have a hard time, and if you've taken a number of hits in a battle, it's also more difficult. Your fire keeps you warm too, but you should be careful; if you're ever cold enough that your tail's extinguished, you won't be protected any more, and… well, you'll be in trouble."

Fen found that thought scarier than she made out. Still, she knew more about this than he could have hoped for, and he wanted to ask more.

"How come I still need to drink water if I'm powered by fire?" he said. "That seems a bit… paradoxical?"

She smirked. "It would make more sense for us to not drink water at all, I agree. But like most other 'mon, we need it for - well, everything really. So it's not entirely correct that we're powered by fire… more like we're powered by both water *and* fire equally."

That raised another question to Fen. "So why does it hurt if I'm hit by water, but just drinking it doesn't hurt?"

"Because your inner flame radiates heat onto your fur, which means any time you come into contact with water, it will sting. The more water hits you, the worse it'll be. When the water's going straight into your mouth that isn't a problem."

He nodded slowly. "I see."

"Any more questions?" she joked.

"Yeah… but I haven't thought of them yet," he quipped back.

"Alright. Let's see what you can do! Just use your fire as if you were attacking."

He frowned. He hadn't given much thought to what he was actually doing when battling. Taking the biggest breath he could manage, he exhaled out, and produced a weak stream of fire. He sighed, frustrated.

Cyan looked at him sympathetically, before speaking slowly. "That wasn't bad by any means, but there are things you can improve on. When it comes to breathing fire, you shouldn't waste time breathing in. It isn't like holding your breath for as long as possible; the key is in exhaling quickly and powerfully. Watch."

Almost before the word had left her mouth, she released a powerful burst of fire, and kept it going for about five seconds before cutting it off.

"See there, I barely had any time to breath in, because it's not important. Your fire is always there in your stomach, it's not as if you need to create it from somewhere. The faster you can exhale, the better, since you need to be able to use your fire in a flash when in battle." She paused for a second. "I just wondered, have you blazed yet?"

"Uh… no?" Fen said, confused at the new term.

She looked at him oddly again. Fen was growing wary of the look by now.

"Well, if you had I think you'd know about it," she said, before raising her energy. "Now have a go at inhaling quickly, then exhaling powerfully. And if you think you're going to run out of breath, keep going anyway! Trust me."

Fen tried to do what she said, and the strength of his fire was hardly different from before. As his lungs started straining, which was only after a second, he kept going and surprised himself with how long he was able to continue with seemingly nothing to go on. Soon afterwards though, he was forced to cut the fire short, and panted for air.

"Hey, not bad!" Cyan called encouragingly. "The more you practice, the longer you'll be able to breathe for, obviously."

When Fen had recovered enough, he asked, "Do you have any other tips?"

Cyan frowned. "Well… that's all I've got in terms of breathing fire. I'm not sure I can easily describe how to perform specific attacks of mine, and even if I could, I'm unsure whether you'd be able to perform them too. Different species are confusing in that respect."

Fen knew exactly what she meant and wasn't surprised. "So I just need to have more battles and eventually things will magically fall into place?" he guessed.

Cyan laughed. "You should *learn* the best ways of doing things, yes. But you're right, that's really all there is to it. What do you say we have a fight right now?"

"What?! But it'll be no match!" Fen protested.

Cyan rolled her eyes. "I'll go easy on you, obviously," she said. "Come on, I just told you how to improve! Are you going to ignore it?"

"Well… okay," he sighed. Cyan hadn't really given him a choice.

He began to crouch himself on all-fours but before he'd even done that, a paw came out and scratched him harshly across the face, knocking him away.

"What!" he spluttered. "I didn't say I was ready!"

She got up and shrugged, smiling. "Okay, another tip would be to always be alert, even before you start fighting. 'Mon will do anything to try and get an upper hand on you."

He thought back to the Rattata biting his arm. "That's fair."

He quickly shifted back into a battle stance and lunged at Cyan, attempting to catch *her* off guard. Not to his surprise though, she saw the scratch coming and easily spun out of the way. As he turned to face her again he saw her body begin to glow, and with a flick of a paw, a barrage of star-shaped pieces of energy flew in his direction. He watched for a moment, startled at the nature of this new attack, then tried to get out of the way, but it was in vain as the stars seemed to follow his dive across. He yelped as they pierced his body, though they were more irritating than painful.

Given her speed, he concluded that physical attacks weren't the best idea, so instead fired an ember at her, which she didn't attempt to avoid. He assumed she'd been waiting for him to try it.

In response, the fire spores on her back expanded to form a ring around her body, and she charged at him, again too fast to avoid. She tackled him, engulfing them both in flames. It hurt, but in a strange kind of pain, as he enjoyed the feeling of fire. However, this sensation of it was just *too* strong, like his body was being overheated. The flames flickered for a few seconds on his body, as if it were deciding whether this new fire was a good thing or not, before it extinguished.

What move was that?! he thought in amazement. He had been in awe of Cyan before with her control of fire; now the feeling was even stronger, and it motivated him to fight back. Undeterred by his aches, he flew at her again.

The time sailed by as they fought each other almost without rest. They were eventually interrupted when another Quilava poked their head into the basement. Fen saw him and hesitated, which Cyan quickly picked up on.

"You're back early, Typh," she said after catching her breath.

"Yeah, didn't feel up for much today," the male Quilava said, yawning. He nodded his head in Fen's direction. "Who's this?" he asked, amused. "I could hear some crashing from upstairs…"

Cyan gestured for Fen to come nearer. "This is Fen. He asked me for some tips on using fire, so that's what we've been doing. Fen, this is my brother Typh."

"Pleased to meet ya," Typh smiled, before practically blasting the space between them with fire. Fen attempted to do the same, knowing that he was meant to, but his fire was far inferior.

"And you," he muttered to Typh. He glanced between Typh and Cyan uneasily. "I should probably be going then…"

Cyan shrugged. "I don't mind. I can show you out."

Typh stayed in the basement as they ascended back up the stairs. Once he was out of earshot, Cyan spoke. "Fen, I hope you don't mind me asking, but some of the things you've told me have left me a little confused."

Fen stumbled on a step in panic. "What do you mean?" he asked casually.

"Well," she said, "you say you've only been here a few days, so I assume you're hatched someplace else, and went on a little journey to reach here."

"Yes…" Fen said cautiously.

"You're certainly civilised, which means you must have had parents to bring you up, or a similar alternative. What I don't get is why you were unaware of everything I talked about today! You didn't know where your fire actually came from, were unsure of the actual *process* you take to breathe fire… you didn't know why we drink water! Do you see what I mean? It seems impossible that a 'mon could arrive here with such little understanding of his own body. I'm not attacking you or anything; I really like you, but it worries me. Did something bad happen to you? Or your family, perhaps?"

He stopped walking, and met Cyan's gaze with his own, fortunate that she had been walking on all-fours at a height closer to his. Her eyes were glimmering, with genuine concern, he thought. It was the second time someone had figured out there was a something wrong with him after Ryu; he wondered if any Pokémon would start to see it if they spent enough time with him. He couldn't feel angry at Cyan for purely showing concern, though. He didn't like the idea of spinning a complex lie to her, and even if he'd wanted to, he had no ideas for one that might be believable. That said, she hadn't clocked that he might not even *be* a Pokémon, so he didn't have to go that far.

"Yeah, something bad happened," he said. "Three days ago, I woke up in a forest not too far from here. I don't have any personal recollection of my past, and some of my other memories were hit

too. I didn't know how to use any of my attacks, for example, and while I woke up in that forest, I didn't know where I was, or have any idea of direction on this whole island. I probably would still be lost there, or be dying of starvation, but I happened to meet Ryu, this Riolu, by chance when I was searching for shelter. I told him about my memory, he took me with him and we've been together ever since."

The thoughts had been whirling around his head, but it still felt strange to get them out in the open. *Would I be dead by now?* he thought. *Did Ryu really save my life? Does he realise how much I owe him…?* They were scary to think about.

Cyan looked at him for a long time, sadness etched over her face. "I'm sorry," she whispered eventually.

Fen shrugged sombrely, unsure what to say. Cyan went on.

"I really wish I could tell you that there's some way to get your memories back, but I don't know of one. Pokémon can do some very powerful things, but to have control over one's memories? I've never heard of something like it…"

At least I have an answer to that question, he thought miserably. "You don't need to apologise," he said. "I didn't have a lot of hope for my memories."

There was unbroken silence for a while, before Cyan said, "I'm going to guess that you don't want everyone to know this about you."

Oh… you only know half the story, he thought. Still, he was intrigued.

"What are you saying?" he asked. "You're right, of course."

"Okay, listen up." She took a hold of his arm to secure his attention. "I was hatched and raised on the outskirts of Arkan Volcano, which is quite a way south from here."

"There's a volcano in this place?"

"Yes. It's a natural habitat for land-dwelling Fires like you and I. That's where I assume you grew up, too. So if someone asks where you were hatched from, or some variation on that…"

"I tell them I was hatched there," he finished.

She smiled. "Exactly, no one'll question that. And you know the Fire greeting I showed you earlier, and what my brother did? Just introduce yourself like that, whenever you meet another Fire." She scratched her neck. "I can't think of anything else you need to know right now."

"I think I know the answers to most of life's fundamental questions, after today," he joked weakly. "As long as I keep these basic questions to myself, no one should suspect anything."

"Or you can ask me!" she said. They reached her front door, which operated without a handle. She nudged it open with her snout, despite having hands available. "I'll be here when it's dark, or you can find me lighting the torches just before then."

He nodded. "Thank you so much," he said. "I don't want to task you with any more questions, but this one is important: how do I get back to the guild from here?"

She laughed. "Asking directions is a *normal* question, especially in this town." Once she directed him, he thanked her again, and they said goodbye for the night. Fen hoped he would see her again.

He found Ryu sitting on the grass just outside the guild, fiddling with the metallic bump on the back of his hand.

Ryu grinned upon seeing him. "Took you long enough."

"You really didn't have to wait for me," Fen said.

"Nah, it's fine. You're not too late for dinner." He led them in, and they took up their usual place at the miniature Pokémon's table.

"So, what were up to for so long?" Ryu asked. When Fen didn't respond, he waved a paw in front of his face impatiently. "Hey!"

Fen looked up dreamily. "Sorry," he muttered. "Just been thinking about what Cyan told me."

"Cyan?"

"The Quilava."

"Oh! What happened there?" Ryu asked mischievously.

Fen looked dimly at him. "It's not what you're thinking," he said, sighing. "I wanted to ask her for some help on breathing fire."

"Oh," Ryu said again. "Well, did you get it?"

Fen nodded. "We went to her house, she showed me a couple of things, told me a *lot* of useful information about Fire Pokémon, and then… we spent hours fighting each other." He frowned. It felt strange to think about those hours spent now. "But eventually I told her about my memory situation, and she said that… she'd never heard of any Pokémon getting their memories completely wiped, and so didn't know of any way I could get them back. Looks like that's a dead end for me."

"Oh… sorry, 'mon," Ryu said. He looked put out. "Are… you alright?"

Fen smiled sadly. *I'm glad he's worried about me. I don't want to dim his mood by acting miserable, though…*

"Don't apologise," he found himself repeating. "But I'm okay, I think. I've lived like this for 3 days now… I'm starting to get the hang of things. The amnesia sucks, but I can't seem to do much about it. No point wallowing in self-pity."

Though, it is taking a pretty monumental effort not to, he thought. His words wanted to convince himself as much as anything.

"It's so strange, this amnesia," he muttered. "I know that my mind wasn't completely wiped, because I can still remember Pokémon species, objects, concepts like time and money. But anything personal to me, it just seems gone. I even forgot my own name, until you asked me about it." He checked Ryu's blank expression. "I don't know, sometimes it helps to say these things out loud. I'm not expecting you to help."

"I wish I *could* help…" Ryu said quietly. After some hesitation, he asked, "What d'you want to do now?"

"… What do you mean?" Fen said.

"Are you going to stay here?" He frowned. "You said that your first goal was to try and get your memories back."

"Oh… yeah," Fen murmured. "I… don't know. I'm still scared of the world out *there*, to be honest. I don't trust myself to succeed in fighting anything… at least not without your help."

Ryu chuckled. "You're not *that* bad. You're trying, at least."

Even though he was sure it was just a throwaway comment, Ryu's sentiment couldn't help making Fen smile. "I'll give it some thought, anyway. Do… you have any ideas on what you'll do?"

Ryu considered. "Uh…" his expression seemed to darken for a second, as if remembering a bad thought, before he shook his head.

"What?" Fen asked suspiciously.

"Sorry," Ryu said quickly. "I mean, I'm happy to stay here for now. It's cool exploring the world around here, don't you think?"

"Well… okay," Fen agreed tiredly. Ryu's concerned look for him returned at that, so he felt compelled to add, "Look, don't worry

about me. I'm not going to run away in the night or anything. I'm not that insane."

"I don't know…" Ryu shrugged. "Being a walking torch would make that a very viable option."

"My tail flame's not *that* strong," he said, then paused. "Don't call me a walking torch!"

Ryu chuckled. "Just telling you what it looks like…"

"Great, thanks for the confidence boost. Can we go to bed?"

Ryu nodded, and hopped down from the table. "Maybe you'll get enough sleep tonight."

"Nah, something'll wake us up in the night again," he joked. "Just gotta try and get as much sleep in before then."

Fen wasn't entirely wrong.

He was drifting into sleep, his breathing slow, conscious thoughts gradually fading away, tail flame getting weaker… when…

He felt it again. A sudden rush of emotion. And it was stronger than before; he was panting, senses on high alert, and had to battle fiercely with himself to calm down. After all, he told himself, there was no danger in this room. He passed his hands through his tail flame almost automatically, since he'd worked out that it helped soothe him.

This again? he thought, sitting up. Then he groaned quietly, feeling his head pound in complaint. For a few moments he could do nothing more than wait for the pain to subside. *That's the second time this has happened, just before I fall asleep… and it was stronger this time. But what is it? It's like a thought, or feeling. It*

didn't communicate with any words, but it was trying to convey a message… some sort of fear… that's what it gave me the first time, too.

Fear of what though? I can't tell… these emotions come at me so strongly, yet the moment I become aware of them and wake up… they vanish.

He sighed and squinted at the darkened room. *What do I do? It's too late to wake anyone. These things don't seem to be harming me beyond the moment they happen… but they're so strange! Would anyone know what I'm talking about if I tried to explain? How* would *I explain?*

Ugh… I guess I'll just leave it for now…

After a few minutes his breathing had returned to normal, and his headache subsided quickly. It didn't take much for him to finally drift off. He didn't experience the feeling again.

Illusions

The following day was business as usual as far as Fen and Ryu's temporary work was concerned. The Machoke builders had done a remarkable job in repairing the damaged homes, taking barely more than one day to get them rebuilt. The guild could get back to doing what it was meant for.

Taluk, the Electabuzz chief, had emerged in the morning after the earthquake, and he emphasised Faoz's message of caution to all. Although the cause of the earthquake was unknown, no further tremors had been reported.

Their mission today turned out to be routine - delivering a shipment of berries to a nearby town - but it had paid better than the letter delivery. Once their reward had been collected and halved with Buin at the guild, they had 400 poké in their possession. Ryu was keen to see what they could buy in town, so they set off for the market in the early evening.

Fen had been in a half-distracted state all-day, feeling like he had forgotten something important. It wasn't until then, when Ryu spoke up, that he remembered.

"D'you think that Absol we saw was warning us about the earthquake here?"

He froze. That night in the forest already felt so long ago… but it *had* happened. The Absol had, he thought, been trying to warn the forest of something.

"I… suppose it must have been," he said. "The earthquake happened, what, two nights after we heard its cry? It would make sense."

"Shame we couldn't do anything about it," Ryu said. "Still," he added breezily, "it's nice to know that what it was warning us of is already over with."

Fen was unable to agree so easily. But he couldn't have explained his uneasiness with this even if he'd tried. Something about the events just didn't sit right. It felt somehow instinctive, much like that rush of emotion he'd had the previous night. *That* had been on his mind all day, but he hadn't been able to make any more sense of it than at the time. He hadn't mentioned it to Ryu, either…

"Fen!"

A familiar bark from beside him, and an unsubtle nudge brought him back to reality. "You were gone again." Ryu sighed, as if he'd said the same thing hundreds of times. "Did you hear what I was asking at all?"

Fen could only look blankly at him.

"I was saying… do you actually know where we're going? Because I don't have a clue."

Fen knew just as little about the town, but before he could answer he saw something familiar in the distance. "Hey, is that Savi?"

The Ivysaur was ahead of them, shuffling in the opposite direction. He glanced up and saw the two of them approaching, but looked strangely forlorn. Fen was taken by surprise, and hurriedly adjusted what he was going to say in greeting.

"Hey Savi… everything alright?"

"Hi guys." Savi shifted uncomfortably. "I'm fine, it's just, uh… you remember my friend Lucxa?"

"Yeah, the Luxio."

"The thing is… ever since that earthquake happened, he just hasn't been the same. It's not like his whole character's changed or anything, he just seems to be really… shaken up. It's not really gone away with time, so we both decided earlier that he should stay with his family here for a while, just until he gets better. That's where I've just been."

"Why's he gotten so worried?" Ryu asked, not too harshly. "The earthquake wasn't that bad, was it? It would make sense for him to feel it worse, being an Electric, but…"

"Yeah. It's affecting all the Electric side of his family pretty bad, though. I suppose tremors like that are so rare around here, maybe he wasn't…" He trailed off, then made an effort to brighten up. "I don't know. Anyway, where are you guys off to?"

"We're looking to spend some of *this*," Ryu said, shaking their bag of poké proudly. His head dropped a little shamefully afterwards. "Though, neither of us have been through this part of town before. We're not sure what we're doing."

"Oh! I'll show you around then," Savi said, jumping at the opportunity. "It's just down this path…"

They soon arrived on what was the town's equivalent of a high street, though the buildings present were carefully built more around the trees and shrubbery. It was another nod to the dedication to nature the town's inhabitants seemed to value. Fen could certainly see the appeal.

"The market is a little further, but I'll show you these buildings anyway in case you need them," Savi said.

There was a money and item storage; a house-building service that was empty, presumably due to the earthquake-induced excess demand; a café-type building that was stylishly decorated with murals of various Pokémon battling each other; a shop selling various types of travel bags

This town is pretty impressive, Fen thought. *Even if the rest of this island seems rather… underdeveloped. I suppose if Pokémon like being close to nature, it's not such a problem for them.*

Beyond these services, Savi led them into an open square, where there was a small market set up, mostly selling fruits and vegetables. Three Vigoroth were scampering around, grabbing goods that customers requested and exchanging money with an energy that seemed unstoppable to quell. It was busier than any other business Fen had seen in the town, which Savi put down to the monopoly it had over 'pure' food.

"'Pure' food?" Fen queried.

"Foods that are useful only for *being* food," Savi explained. "So not healing berries and the like. They do sell the more basic ones like cheris, but the best berries are a bit pricier. I think the store on the end does those…"

The shop hanging on the end of the square appeared little more than a counter with a canopy over it, and a small hut situated within. Much more interesting were the goods on display, none of them at all recognisable to Fen other than the distinct blue of oran berries.

"Whoa… what is *this* stuff?" Ryu asked excitedly, instantly going over to gaze at the items. However, his enthusiasm faded when he noticed the lack of movement on the other side of the counter. A Linoone was slumped against a door further back in the canopy, eyed closed and mouth open, apparently dosing.

Ryu, unsure what else to do, thumped the bumpy back of his paw against the counter, producing a harmonic *clink.* At this, the Linoone quickly blinked his eyes open and sidled over to them.

"Good evening lads," he said, clearing his throat. "How can I help?"

So… he must own this shop… Fen felt very confused at the Linoone's behaviour, and couldn't resist asking: "Did you mean to be

asleep just now?"

The Linoone shrugged. "Tiring work, this. Most of my customers know me well, so just give me a knock if I'm dosing off."

"You're not worried that, say… someone might steal the things you've left here?"

"Ha!" The Linoone grinned. "You underestimate me, Chimchar." He picked up one of the berries and gave it a squeeze. Nothing happened. "The goods you see here are all fakes; they're just there to show what I'm selling. The good stuff's kept in my home. And in the unlikely event that I *am* asleep, I'll be in front of the door anyway."

Fen didn't have a retort for that, so the Linoone asked again. "Can I help with anything?"

Ryu jumped at the question this time. "I just… I've never seen any of these items before!" he said. "What is this place? Could you just… uh-"

"Run through them?" the Linoone offered, smiling. "Yeah, I get asked that a lot. This is 'Scout's Explorers Store', as I like to call it."

"Scout?" Ryu questioned. "That's you?"

"Mm. Not my hatch name, just one that I've picked up over the years. It sounds better in a title. Here, I sell anything I've gathered on my travels that I think's worth something. If that sounds like I deal in antiques, you'd be *wrong*, and probably very confused at what you see here. So, let's start with the least exciting stuff."

He perched on his hind legs to point to a cluster of different berries. "Here we've got your orans, leppas, lums, *would* have sitruses if I could ever get my hands on them… they're as rare as a friendly Dark, though. I've got plenty of the other berries."

Scout shuffled across a little to a jumble of multiple seeds, then pulled out a handful of them for Ryu and Fen to see properly. "You've probably come across seeds before, but you might not have seen all of these."

He pointed out each of them as he explained. "You've got your energy seed, which is like a condensed oran berry, and your heal seed, which does the same job as a lum. Fairly straightforward there. A quick seed, which is exactly what it sounds like. Similarly with stun seeds and sleep seeds, just break 'em on someone for their effect. Blast seeds, which explode when broken into. Don't mistake them for food! And maybe the scariest of all… the violent seed. Best saved for desperate situations… and when you don't care too much for your opponent's safety."

He swept the fake seeds aside and moved on to some different coloured pieces of fabric.

"Scarves. There are some *normal* scarves out there" - he said the word with obvious disgust - "but all the ones sold here have a special enchantment attached. I'm yet to find an 'Arceus' scarf or anything crazily strong, but together they have a lot of uses. Like, this one makes you hit harder, this one lets you *take* more hits, this one gives you better foresight and agility, this one keeps out fatigue for longer…" He paused for breath. "They're quite confusing things, and very rare, so you're welcome to "try before you buy"; though that only applies to the scarves. Everything else I sell has a one-time use."

Scout looked at them expectantly, as if they could have taken all that in.

"Sorry, I can't believe this," Fen blurted. "How come we've never come across any of these items on our travels? Enchanted scarves? How is that possible?"

Scout looked amused. "Well, I have a bit of a knack for finding these things," he said elusively.

Fen just stared at him. "That's hardly-"

"Hold on," Scout interrupted. He thought for a moment. "Let's talk about seeds. You must've noticed there are seeds growing all over Kyunn, but most of them are what I call 'plain seeds'; they don't have any effect. If you want to find the rare ones yourself, I'd suggest you remember what they look like, and search around, scavenge, like you've never done before."

"And the scarves?" Fen said.

"I gotta be honest, their origins are still a mystery to me. I've just happened to pick them up on adventures. Look, *trust me* when I say that I'm good at finding things. Finding things is pretty much all I can do, aside from run fast."

Though Fen was still a little mystified at the abundance of treasures Scout possessed, he trusted that the Linoone was at least giving a rough form of the truth. Ryu spoke next: "So… we've got 400 poké right now. What does that get us?"

"Ah… this stuff doesn't come cheap," Scout said, frowning. "The seeds come at 500 each as a minimum, while the scarves tend to go for around 5000. All I can sell you are berries. I normally price them at 250 a pop, but as you're so skint… I could do two for 400."

They both balked at the figures, even accounting for them being reduced. *Savi wasn't wrong about these things being pricey…*

Fen glanced at Ryu sceptically and asked, lowering his voice, "How much do you value these berries? I'm not sure we should blow all our money on them."

Ryu shrugged. "What else do we need to buy? We get enough food at the guild, and you can normally forage for anything extra during the day…"

Fen paused, and Ryu took that to mean agreement. "Could we get one oran and one lum berry?" he asked Scout.

Fen couldn't argue with his reasoning, but naturally felt a tinge of anxiety at being left without a coin. "What's a lum berry do?" he muttered to Ryu.

"Hmm… like an oran berry, but for different ailments? Like if you're paralysed, or poisoned, or some other thing. They're pretty useful."

Fen nodded. "Fair enough."

"You lads work for that guild place?" Scout asked, as he was storing their payment.

"Yeah, we started recently," Ryu said.

"Well, if you're taking on jobs, how about you help me with something?" Scout said. "I was travelling around the forests just north-west of here, in a place called Hidden Wood, when I lost one of these scarves. I can't go looking for it now, what with having to run the shop all week. If you can find it for me, I'll give you a pretty special reward… at least, I hope it's special."

Ryu's eyes had already lit up at Scout's mention of a reward, cryptic as that was, but Fen found himself reluctant to trust him. "You *just* lost it?" he asked.

"Afraid so," Scout said easily. "Truth is, my bag was too full, and it must've fallen out of the top when I was coming out of the woods. I only noticed when I stopped to get a drink." At Fen's suspicious look, he added, "You ever seen our species run? Once we get going, nothing's stopping us. I wouldn't have noticed it hitting the ground."

"He is right, Fen," Ryu added. "Linoone are rapid."

Scout smiled gleefully at that.

Even if Scout was to be trusted, there was something else bothering Fen. "And what about the woods itself? Is it a hostile place?"

Scout thought seriously for a second. "No, but do you have a map I can use?"

Ryu promptly pulled theirs out. Scout examined it closely, then dipped one of his claws in some ink and drew, with a surprising level of precision, a small circle around an area split between two mountains.

"I thought your map might not have it inscribed, so here's the wood's rough location, just in this valley. Quite off the beaten track, but you shouldn't miss it. As for the wood itself… it's pretty quiet. You might disturb some Zubat if you're too loud, but with the three of you, there should be no problem."

"Three of us…?" Ryu glanced behind him, and found Savi had been waiting patiently for them to finish. At Ryu's gaze, he looked up questioningly, and the Riolu quickly turned back. "Oh no, he's not with-"

"Wait," Fen interrupted. "Give us a second, Scout." Scout looked a little puzzled but seemed to understand.

"We should ask Savi if he wants to go with us!" Fen muttered. "Surely three of us would be stronger than two?"

Ryu narrowed his eyes. "I don't know…"

The reluctance to put faith in Savi puzzled Fen. "Surely there's nothing wrong with having an extra person on our side?" he asked. "Plus, Savi's lost his usual partner for now, and looked pretty down when he saw us… I just think it's the right thing to do, maybe cheer him up a bit."

Ryu opened his mouth for a second to argue, then decided against it. "Alright. Let's ask him."

They motioned Savi over, and Fen asked him if he'd like to come along.

"Hey, I'd love to!" Savi smiled. "Hopefully I can be helpful in some way."

Yeah… Fen thought. *Maybe I should wait before telling him that I'm terrible at fighting.*

"Is everything I've said clear?" Scout asked them, once they gave their consent to the job.

"Yeah!" Ryu said. "This should be great!"

Fen found himself unable to resist a smile at Ryu's antics. "You really want this reward," he muttered dryly. Ryu shot him an annoyed look, but he couldn't deny it.

After they gave their approval to Scout, the shopkeeper deftly scribbled down some details on paper with one of his paws for Ryu to take back. He instructed them to hand it to Faoz, so it would function the same way as a mission that would go through the guild.

"Those things that Scout called scarves… I've never seen anything like it before," Ryu was saying, as they ambled back from the market. Savi had stayed behind for some business of his own, so they had agreed to meet up again in the morning. "You ever heard of 'em, Fen?"

"Mm," Fen hummed. "In winter, scarves are really popular with humans. But they're mainly just to protect against the cold, certainly not to give any of those enchantments Scout was talking about."

"Huh… but they protect you against the cold?" Ryu queried. "That is an enchantment in some way…"

Fen shook his head, chuckling. "Wrap anything around you and it'll have the same effect. I don't think humans see their regular old scarves as anything magical just for keeping the wind out."

Just then, his ears pricked up. He was still getting used to all his body's sensations, but he felt it sense a movement behind him, and quickly darted his eyes around. The streets were mostly empty this late, with only a couple of other figures visible about 20 metres away. But for his ears to react, he assumed it must have been a sudden movement.

"Fen?" Ryu enquired.

He took one more look around, then shook his head and resumed walking. "Just thought I heard something."

Barely a few seconds later, he stopped once more upon hearing a dull padding of footsteps that certainly was behind them. He was surprised at the owner, though: it was Savi again.

"Hey," Savi said briefly to them, before turning to Fen. "Could I… speak with you, in private, quickly? It won't take long."

His voice, and the way he spoke, sounded off somehow, but Fen couldn't pin down exactly why. Still, he couldn't think of a reason to refuse. "Uh… sure. Ryu, I'll see you later?"

Ryu hesitated for a moment, eyeing up Savi cautiously. "Yeah, alright," he said eventually. "See ya later." He gave Fen a friendly thump on the back, then set off towards the guild.

Fen turned back to face Savi. *What could he possibly want? There's no way he could have figured out I'm a human, or even that I've lost my memory, is there? Maybe I'm being paranoid…*

"Just come with me, quickly," Savi told him, a hint of anxiety in his voice, which troubled Fen even more. Savi led him down a deserted alley just off the main street they were on, leading out of town

through a woodland area. The combination of the dim, cramped alleyway, the eerie silence and Savi's own behaviour eventually was too much for Fen to handle, and he finally spoke up.

"Savi, what's the problem?" he asked as friendlily as he could, when they were halfway down the alley.

Savi stopped, facing away from him. He briefly checked the surroundings around them, then out of nothing, he turned and his whole form seemed to change; a shadowy fist leapt out at Fen, punching him in the stomach with such force that he couldn't even cry in pain, all the air immediately sucked out of him. Before he could react, the figure tackled him to the ground and kept him there, pinning his legs and lower body to the floor with two paws, claws bared.

Though he could barely move under the creature's weight, he managed to lift his head enough to get a good look at his captor. It stood on four legs, with the front two used to hold him down. It was dark grey in colour, with tufts of reddish fur in places. Its eyes blazed with a wild fury, and the Pokémon's two fangs were bared aggressively at him. He was struck by how small a figure it looked - it seemed to be roughly equal in height to him, if just a little taller. Nothing had hit him this hard before.

But this didn't make sense!Hadn't he been talking to Savi barely a second ago? He didn't recognise this Pokémon, but it was certainly a different species to an Ivysaur. So how had it-

The Pokémon interrupted his train of thought abruptly. "Who are you?" she demanded - for though it was hoarsely spoken, fangs still bared, there was no doubt the voice was female. "No one here knows anything of humans, other than that they exist in another land. So how do you know about them?"

How do I know about humans?! How am I supposed to answer that? Who is this Pokémon?

Fen tried to speak, but couldn't manage a single word before he broke into a fit of smoky coughs. He was still winded from the punch. The grey Pokémon scowled and flicked her head away from him slightly, but she didn't loosen her hold.

He tested his voice again when he felt ready, but he could only manage a croaky whisper. His anxiety rose another level when he realised that he wouldn't be able to cry for help, at least not for a minute or two. All he could do was concentrate on the Pokémon's question.

"Savi…?" he whispered hesitantly. "Are you-"

"Ugh, the green plant isn't me," the Pokémon snapped. "Answer me. Who are you? Did you come from human lands?"

Fen stared at her incredulously. If he wasn't so terrified, and short of breath, he would be bursting with questions to ask. "I… I think so?" he said uncertainly.

The Pokémon pressed down harder on his legs and bared her fangs again. "What do you mean?!" she demanded. "You either are from there or you aren't!"

Fen tried to shake his head, but barely had the ability to do so. "I don't know… I lost my memories…"

The Pokémon now looked at him in bemusement. "You lost your memories," she repeated, "but you *think* you came from human lands?"

Fen managed to jerk his head in agreement.

"You don't know how you got *here,* then?" she asked.

Fen shook his head again.

"And you don't know who I am? You're not *looking* for me, at all?" She paused for a second, before muttering, "What you asked proves

that, anyway…"

"Please believe me," Fen gasped, "I have no idea who you are, *what* you are, and I'm certainly not looking for you… just don't hurt me…"

The Pokémon looked set to loosen her constraint for a second, then did so, but only very slightly. It did allow Fen to get some precious air flowing through his lungs. "You haven't explained how you know anything about humans," she pressed. "Or were you just spouting bullshit to your friend a moment ago?"

Didn't I just imply that I didn't know how? he thought frantically. *I doubt she'd be happy if I told her that again. But if I told her I was a human… would she even believe that? It might sound even more absurd…*

His gut was telling him that this Pokémon, crazy as it was acting, might be able to help him. It clearly had a connection with the human world, which, while he hadn't been able to really search for that so far, very much interested him. He swallowed, trying not to think about the implications of his decision, and began speaking.

"The truth is… I'm a-"

He broke off upon hearing a faint call of "Fen!" in the distance - several calls in fact, from different voices. The cries were followed up with the thudding of feet. The grey Pokémon must have heard it too, as she immediately loosened her hold on him, and glanced around anxiously. Fen was still pinned down, unable to turn his head enough to see.

The sound of footsteps intensified. "Hey, he's here! Quick!" *Ryu's voice!*

The grey Pokémon must have seen something at the end of the alley, as she muttered a curse. She gave Fen one last look, a mixture of anger at being caught, but also curiosity at what he had told her. Then, as she was about to make a move, Fen gasped,

"Wait! I have to talk to you again… we might help each other! We have something in common, at least…"

The faintest of smiles flickered across her face, but it quickly gave way to a cold scowl. "I'm sure we'll meet again," she said.

With that, she galloped off into the woodland area out of town. Finally able to sit up, Fen saw Ryu and an Electabuzz running in his direction, with Savi following close behind. The Electabuzz barked at the other two to stay with Fen, as he dashed past them into the trees, searching for the attacker.

"Fen!" Ryu exclaimed, grabbing his arm. "Are you alright? Who was that?"

Fen looked at him helplessly, and squeaked, "Could you help me up, first?"

Ryu put one hand behind Fen's back and used the other to pull his arm up. He managed to get his legs underneath him, but cried out in pain the moment he tried putting weight on them. They had been crushed under the grey Pokémon's weight for a long time.

"Give him a berry, quick!" Ryu almost shouted to Savi, who quickly pulled out an oran berry from his own bag and passed it over. Fen wasn't able to enjoy it quite as much as when he ate his first one, but he still sighed in relief as the pain in his legs was numbed, enough for him to stand unsteadily. At least nothing was broken.

He wiped his eyes, conscious that they were wet. He had previously wondered whether his species was able to cry or not, but this looked like evidence for the former, even if he had been unaware of it in the moment. "Thank you," he said to them both. "How… how did you find me?"

Ryu answered. "I started walking off when you left with Savi, but I got suspicious and decided to retrace my steps. I ran into Savi going the other way up the path. I asked him where you were, and he said he

hadn't spoken to you at all… that's when I got really worried, so we started calling your name on every side-street. Then Taluk heard, and he started looking as well, and eventually we saw you here…"

"Oh, this doesn't make any sense!" Savi cried suddenly. He looked upset. "I didn't attack you Fen, so who was it on top of you? I never even saw you back there…"

"I don't know who she was!" Fen said, equally exasperated. "At first she had your appearance Savi, but she suddenly changed shape to that Pokémon you saw, and before I could react I was pinned on the floor! That's not normal, is it? But it's what happened…"

Just then, the Electabuzz re-emerged from the woodland, swearing furiously and looking generally disgruntled. Fen realised that this must be Taluk, the police chief.

He muttered, "I don't know how they did it, but I couldn't find that thug anywhere. Looks like they've escaped." He turned to Fen, and quickly introduced himself. "Did you know the species of that thing?"

"No idea," Fen said.

"Me neither," the Electabuzz frowned. "Your friend Riolu here says he saw you walking off with an Ivysaur. But it wasn't the one standing here? Was it another attacker disguised?"

Fen spoke reluctantly: "No, there was only one attacker… it seemed to disguise itself as another Pokémon, as Savi, which was how I got caught off-guard."

Taluk's eyes widened at the description. "Are you sure about that?"

"That's all I saw," Fen said.

Taluk scratched his head. "That's very peculiar… Do you have any idea why you were targeted? Anything the attacker said to you?"

"No," Fen said carefully. "She was pretty incoherent with what she was saying, so I couldn't make out anything. Sorry."

Taluk nodded gravely. "Not a problem. Come by the security base if there's anything useful you remember. Will you be all right making it home?"

"Yeah, we've got him," Ryu said. Fen thanked Taluk, and they walked back up to the main street of town before going their separate ways.

Ryu put an arm around his shoulders and neck to hold him up for the walk back, despite him not really needing it, while Savi also hung close. It made him more at ease, but only a little. The previous events were spinning frantically in his head, trying to be made sense of.

"Hey, Fen," Ryu said, as they were eating back in the guild. "There was something I meant to show ya earlier, but forgot about. Wanna see it now?"

Fen looked at him, puzzled. Ryu gave him one back that seemed to say, *'just trust me on this.'*

After what had just happened, his suspicions were on high alert. *Could this be that Pokémon again…? Well, if it is, she's done a fine Ryu impression… but no, there's no way. This* is *Ryu.*

So Fen gave a quick 'see ya' to Savi, before following Ryu out to the grass just outside the guild's entrance. After Ryu sat down, he did likewise.

"Ay, there isn't actually anything to show you here," Ryu apologised, before he could ask. "I wanted to ask something. I hope you don't mind me saying, but… that Pokémon attacking you. There *was* a reason for it, wasn't there?"

Fen looked at Ryu with some amazement. "Was it that obvious I lied?" he said.

"No!" Ryu said at once. "No… I just had a feeling. I dunno." He shrugged.

Fen sighed. "Well, you're right. She attacked me because she heard me mention, uh…"

Out of new-found suspicion, he glanced around to make sure no-one was listening. "You know… the thing I am. Not that I *was* one, but just the mentioning of them. Presumably she heard when we were talking on the way back from the market."

Ryu blinked at him, then lowered his voice in keeping with Fen's behaviour. "She attacked you because you mentioned… humans? That's all it was?"

"I think so. I didn't want to mention that to Taluk, though."

Ryu nodded. "What did she have against them?"

"Well… she didn't say explicitly, but demanded to know if I was searching for her, or something. She asked if I came from the 'human lands', too…"

"What did you say?"

Fen grimaced. "That I didn't know, which is sort of true. She wasn't happy with that response, though. I'm not sure how much she would have hurt me if you hadn't arrived, but I was getting desperate, and was about to tell her that I was a-"

He made a little "m-mn" noise to indicate what was now the 'h-word'. "Then you did arrive, and she scattered. I owe you one for that."

He felt slightly uncomfortable expressing his gratitude, as although he *was* glad to be safe, he felt as if his and the grey Pokémon's conversation - if that's what he could call it - had been cut short at a

crucial moment, *because* of Ryu finding them. Maybe it was a good thing she didn't hear him say he was a human. Unless he met her again, he wouldn't know.

Ryu sat in silence with him for a while, absent-mindedly flicking one of his ears. "Do you… think she could be of some importance to you?"

Fen raised his eyebrows, the question unexpected. "Yes. Well, she's the first person that seems to have any knowledge of *them* at all, beyond the fact that they exist away from here - and she told *me* that exact thing, too. There might be more I can learn from her… we have something pretty unusual in common.

"She seems dangerous, though." Ryu warned. "Couldn't she easily attack you again?"

"Definitely," Fen agreed. "But I still want a chance to talk to her, even if my legs get properly broken… it's a risk I'm willing to take."

Ryu chuckled. "Very foolish. I'm a fan."

"I would call it 'bravery'," Fen quipped. "But… I am serious. She could mean a lot."

Ryu thought for a second. "Do you think she might be a human too?"

Fen almost laughed at the wildness of the idea. "It's possible, I guess. But she didn't assume *I* was a human when she asked… oh, I don't know!" He buried his face in his hands, even though they only covered about half of it. "What this has made clear is that I need to watch my mouth more. Not to bring up *them* while people might be listening."

"Oh, I was wondering… why do you try and hide the, uh, thing about you so much?" Ryu asked. Fen was about to respond quickly, but he interjected, "As well as it just being weird, I understand that."

Hm… Fen struggled to think of how to explain. "Well… I'm not sure how Pokémon here would take it. It's okay for you, because you don't know anything about *them* . But…" he trailed off, unsure. "Can we talk about this another time? I'm exhausted after today."

Ryu crossed his arms in annoyance. "You don't want to tell me something…"

"That's not what it is!" Fen protested, painfully aware that this was *exactly* what it was. "It's hard to explain, and I don't think now is the best time."

Ryu sighed, also looking weary. "Alright, fine. Let's go to bed."

They got up and scurried back to the relative warmth of the guild's room. Despite his exhaustion, Fen initially found himself too restless to drift off to sleep. On top of puzzlement over the rush of emotion he'd felt the previous night, this day's events had just added to his worries. He'd met - or been attacked by - a Pokémon bearing some relation to humans… but what? It must have been something bad for her to attack him with such ferocity. If she did come from human lands, then she also might be able to get back there… so would he be able to as well?

And now a new problem, that he'd hardly had time to consider before. What would Ryu think if he told him Pokémon were something humans could own - whether that be as pets, or for them to train?

It's not as if Pokémon were treated badly… or were they? He frowned, frustrated. *Why can't I remember that? It's got nothing to do with my memories!*

He pondered over how much thought he was giving this. How one person would react to something he *may* have to tell them eventually seemed somewhat trivial, compared with his earlier thoughts. But the fact it was *Ryu* made all the difference. Ryu was hardly a perfect

companion, but Fen felt he owed him an awful lot for all his help, and the possibility of losing him hurt to think about.

At least his sleep that night was undisturbed.

As planned, they set out the next morning for Hidden Wood. With three of them, Savi advised that they only take one bag, and with his own ripped shoulder-bag looking worse for wear, they agreed instead to transfer the supplies he had into Ryu's. It wasn't much - two oran berries, a lum berry, and enough fruit and water for a day - but Ryu and Savi felt it was enough.

Following the path northwards that Scout had drawn out for them, they were taken through a valley that veered wildly in both direction and steepness. Scout had mentioned that it was 'off the beaten track', and the absence of any foot or paw-trodden path suggested as much.

Frustrated at the way the valley took long-winded route around the mountains it flanked on either side, Ryu suggested they climb up one of the mountains and find a shortcut to the wood that way. But Savi had to reluctantly object, pointing out that his own body wasn't at all suited to climbing and mountaineering in the way theirs were. Ryu looked a little disgruntled but kept his complaints to a minimum, to Fen's relief.

Having to take a slower route meant they had been travelling for nearly three hours when the mountains finally sloped off, and a densely packed area of woodland loomed below in sharp decline. The angle of the slope made it hard to judge the deepness of the wood, but it would have been inaccessible, and undetected, from any other route on the island.

"It is hidden," Ryu dryly remarked.

As they stopped to rest, a few drops of rain began falling. Fen felt them hit his fur with an uncomfortable sizzle. He had almost

managed to forget about the mild trauma that the Cheri Forest rainstorm had caused. But the instincts that had woken him up then seemed to be coming back just as strong. He looked around at the others. "Can we shelter somewhere?"

Even as he said it, he felt the rain get heavier. A harsh wind had picked up with it too, making Ryu and Savi look almost as restless as they tried to keep their balance. The only good shelter Fen could imagine was in the wood itself, perhaps under a big-enough tree. So it was to his surprise when Ryu ran over to a large boulder nearby, appeared to check the direction of wind and rain, then drew one arm back. With three well-placed punches, he excavated a sufficient opening in the rock and gestured for them to climb in. As they squeezed inside the protected dome, Fen caught onto an unfamiliar urge to shake himself dry, which he was more than happy to oblige with.

"Hey!" Ryu barked immediately, having caught the brunt of his excess water.

Fen could only laugh sheepishly. "Sorry. I didn't know you could smash rocks like that."

Ryu shrugged. "Fists made of steel," he joked, clinking the backs of his paws together for effect.

The storm raged on with a ferocious intensity, such that despite their rock shield facing away from the rainfall, vapour still filtered through to them. Fen could only push himself further into the rock's interior. When it finally passed an hour later, the ground outside was entirely sodden. Luckily, the forest itself looked a little drier.

Once they made their way down, though - Savi by carefully navigating a way down the grassy bank, Fen by following Ryu's lead at a half-run, half-skid - a faint, greyish mist had settled on the wood. It blocked out a good chunk of natural light from the area, creating an illusion of twilight despite the blue midday sky they'd just been walking in.

"This fog came out of nowhere," Fen mused. "Just like the storm."

"It is odd," Ryu agreed. "But lucky we brought our torch with us, hey?" He gave Fen a hefty nudge.

"Shut up," Fen grumbled half-heartedly, having already heard enough jibes at his tail. "Anyway, that doesn't help us see much, unless I walk backwards. I can't pull the flame in front of me."

"You could *make* a torch with a branch, or something," Ryu offered.

Fen stopped. The suggestion was so plausible, it took him by surprise. "That's… actually a great idea."

It took a few minutes of foraging around the trees for them to find a branch that was both dry, and the right length and density for Fen to hold. The thicker branches were far too long, which eventually led to Ryu aggressively snapping one of them in half on his thigh. He passed the shortened piece of wood to Fen, who had to twist himself awkwardly to light it on his tail. Once that was done, he shined their new torch ahead.

"It looks like there's only one way we can go," he reported. "I can't see an end to this place though… and in this light, it'll take some serious searching to find a little scarf."

"Yeah… can we stick together for now?" Savi piped up. He shivered slightly. "I'm not sure about this place… feels dangerous."

"Yeah, yeah, we'll stay together," Ryu said brusquely. "Scout told us there wasn't anything to worry about, anyway."

They got into a rough triangle formation, Fen leading the way with tail in hand, and Ryu and Savi flanking just behind. Scanning around for a white scarf made him acutely aware of the surroundings. The wood did look devoid of any life, going by the bare-leafed trees that bore no berries or fruit, and there was no discernible water supply. Despite that, he flinched a couple of times upon sensing a

movement nearby, only to find either no source at all, or just the tiny scuttling legs of a Spinarak.

The wood opened out more as they walked, but with that the mist intensified, cutting their visibility further.

"This fog… it's so thick!" he heard Savi say behind him. "How are we going to search properly now? I can barely see my paw in front of me."

At that, Fen stopped walking. "I'm worried about this as well," he said. "Should we wait and see if it clears a bit?"

"No!" Ryu barked abruptly. "Let's… keep moving."

Fen squinted at him questioningly. "Why? Savi's right, if we can hardly see-"

He was interrupted by a spine-chillingly harsh scream, coming from somewhere in the distance though it was impossible to tell where. He and Savi simultaneously jumped at the noise, though Ryu stayed perfectly still. As the first scream echoed around them, it was joined by a cacophony of other cries, all combining to create a din that made Fen want to rip his ears off, how much it pierced into his head.

"Wh-what's going on?" he distantly heard Savi stutter.

None of them could answer. Then ahead of them, an area of fog shifted of its own accord, and coalesced into a purple, floating head, grinning terrifyingly at them. Ryu yelped as a shadowy fist materialised from beneath the head, apparently disconnected from it entirely, and glanced a punch off his hip, sending him sprawling backwards. Ryu quickly spun around, imbued his palm with a white energy and thrust it into the Haunter before him.

Except… it didn't hit the Haunter at all. Ryu's paw went straight through the Ghost's body, and just hung there. He gazed up at his enemy, frozen in shock, not even able to curse. For a moment the

Haunter was content just to grin savagely at his misfortune; but then its body glowed red, and while Fen didn't see Ryu get hit with anything physical, he suddenly screamed in pain, and fell weakly to his knees.

The Haunter might've attacked him again, but before it could it was whipped by a pair of vines, each making a hollow-sounding *thud* as they connected with whatever substance the Ghost was made of. Seeing a reminder of Savi's abilities woke Fen from his own frozen state, and he rushed to spit some embers at the Haunter. Savi followed his own attack up by tilting himself forwards and producing an assault of bullet-like seeds from the bud on his back. None of the hits wiped the grotesque smile off the Haunter's face, but its body evaporated after the last seed fell, leaving a head-shaped chink in the fog.

Then the fog whirled rapidly around itself, as if it were a conscious being looking to repair the damage to its armour. Fen rushed over to Ryu, who hadn't moved since the Haunter's attacks. "Ryu!" he cried frantically. "Are you alright? We need you here!"

Ryu shook his head, shivering feverishly. "I can't… they're Ghosts… I can't hurt them! I can't do anything…"

Before Fen could muster any kind of response - maybe it was a blessing that he didn't have to - Savi shouted from behind them: "Do either of you Slakoth want to help?!" His voice had a ferocity Fen hadn't heard before. "We've got more to deal with here!"

Fen twisted and saw another floating head, smaller and slightly less scary, but alongside it was a huge one-eyed monster that, more terrifyingly, had actual legs to walk on. It was this one that was moving towards him and Ryu.

Savi threw out a barrage of razor-sharp leaves that forced the smaller 'mon back, though wasn't enough to evaporate it entirely. Fen couldn't see any option but to go similarly guns-blazing on the

bipedal Ghost. He leapt to his feet, and got ready to position himself for an ember, but his foot caught on something.

He looked down to the floor to find… a rucksack, with two slashes etched in the side. Ryu's. He grabbed it and extended an arm out towards him, not wanting to take his eyes of their enemy…

Yet the bag continued to hang in the air. " *Ryu*…" Fen murmured impatiently, hoping its owner would notice. When he still got nothing, he adverted his gaze and looked to the right of him, where Ryu had been shivering in fear. Except he wasn't there.

Ryu had vanished.

Rescue Mission

For a few seconds, Fen just stared at the empty space where Ryu had stood. *I don't understand… where did he go?! He didn't-*

A sudden cracking brought him back to his senses, which was then followed by a harsh shriek, much like the one they'd heard moments before the Ghosts in front of them had appeared. *Right, I need to focus. There's still a battle to be fought.*

He spun back towards the two Ghosts, and - no, there was only the bipedal one left now. The smaller Ghost that had been fighting Savi had vanished, and his vines were currently straining to wrap around the two-legged creature, trying to constrict its movements. The distraction gave Fen the opportunity to attack.

His first instinct was to slash wildly at the Ghost, but fortunately his rationality prevailed in this case, assuming that, like Ryu, his arms would just pass straight through its body. Tossing his makeshift torch to the side for now, he opted for the *second* instinct, spitting all the fire he could manage at the Ghost.

He heard Savi yelp in pain, his vines rapidly withdrawn as his flames hit. *Ah… I forgot I'd be hitting him as well.*

The Ghost tottered for a second, but as it seemed to be losing balance, its single eye met with Fen's own. Its red pupil was huge, and the intensity of its gaze terrifying. In that moment, Fen instinctively tried to pull himself away from the sight, but his eyes somehow couldn't obey him. He was fixed in place.

The Ghost's eye blazed white, so sudden and bright that Fen was temporarily blinded. With his sight went his own sense of balance, causing him to stagger and fall onto his side in dizziness. Still able to see very little, he tried to get up again, but felt overwhelmed with nausea.

While he fought with his senses, he could hear a cracking of… something he wasn't sure of, and another screech of pain, lower in pitch than he remembered before. The sounds reverberated horribly around him, muddling his hearing and dazing him even more. His vision lurched again as someone pulled him into an upright sitting position. He felt sick.

He tried to make sense of what he was seeing, but it was difficult. There was a dark green creature in front of him, its dark red eyes glowing in the dimness. Was this Pokémon familiar? Its eyes looked dangerous, which meant it must be an enemy. He growled intimidatingly at the figure, and got ready to fire an ember, when a sudden slap to the face extinguished it in his throat. His vision spun again, and he slumped back on the muddy floor.

The creature's breathing, if that's what he could hear as he faced sideways, suddenly intensified. He heard a scrambling of limbs, and a muttering from nearby: "why is Ryu's bag here… where *is* Ryu…?" He heard the words, but like before they rattled around in his skull, as if being fired from all directions.

The dark green figure snapped back into his vision and thrust a piece of fruit at his mouth before he could react. "Eat," the figure ordered, a little shakily. "Or I'll hit you again."

Not left with much choice, Fen carefully took the berry and bit down into it, not paying much attention to taste. Not long after he had swallowed the first bite, his vision cleared, his ears began working properly, and he got a striking, almost wonderous feeling of clarity about the world that had been missing a second ago. He realised he was lying on his side, and quickly righted himself, then blinked at the Pokémon in front of him. He gasped.

"Savi!" he cried. "What was I… did I try to attack you? I… growled at you… I don't understand…"

Savi looked at him pitifully. "You were confused," he said. "Confusion's… well, pretty awful from my mercifully limited

experience. Pretty much everything other than your basic survival instincts gets distorted to the point where you don't know who's friend or enemy. It seems you thought I was an enemy, so… yeah. To stop you attacking me…" He grimaced. "Sorry about the slap."

"No! I'm thankful you did it, if I was about to attack you," Fen said sincerely. The ease at which he'd almost hurt Savi disturbed him, but he tried to ignore that worry for now, focusing on piecing their recent, confused events together in his head. "So what happened to that Pokémon we were fighting?"

"It's gone," Savi said. "As well as the first one."

"You… defeated both of them?"

He shrugged. "You helped a little."

"It was basically all you," Fen corrected. "Well, thanks. Good job."

Savi smiled briefly, his two upper teeth protruding out of his mouth slightly as he did. He passed their water flask to Fen, who drank gratefully. Once he was done, he noticed the look of uncertainty etched on his ally's face and felt the need to speak up again.

"Ryu's gone."

Savi's eyes met his. "It looks that way."

"So… you didn't see him disappear? Or anything like that?" Fen's voice rose with increasing anxiety.

Savi shook his head. "I can't imagine he got captured by a Ghost, since that's logically… wrong." He frowned. "Maybe he saw something and didn't have time to tell us?"

Fen looked at him unconvincingly, and Savi replied a little more irritably, "Hey, you know him better than me; what do you suggest?"

It was Fen's turn to frown. He would like to say he knew Ryu well, and maybe he did, but he had already experienced the way his friend could act unexpectedly. And if Ryu couldn't have been captured, or at least treating that as a very unlikely cause… there seemed only one reason for his disappearance.

"I think… he ran away intentionally," Fen said at last. "His moves can't hit Ghost Pokémon, as you probably saw…"

"You think he got scared, or something?" Savi asked. "That seems… odd for him."

"I wouldn't expect it from Ryu either," Fen replied. "But I can't see any other alternatives." Savi could only reluctantly agree.

"If he did run away, I suppose he'd be looking for the same exit that we came in from," Fen offered.

"Would he be able to find that?" Savi said. "It's hard to see anything here without a source of light. We have that right now, but he doesn't."

"True…" Fen suddenly pounded the ground in frustration. "How did this even happen? Scout said this wood was deserted, not a Ghost-infested nightmare of a place."

Savi looked at him helplessly. "I've never even encountered Ghosts before."

Fen sighed. "Me neither."

They were both tired out from their fight, and simply rested for a few moments before Savi spoke.

"Remember, we *were* meant to be finding a scarf in here, too," he said uneasily. "If we don't come out with anything, we'll have failed the mission…"

Fen stared at him in disbelief. "Someone's just disappeared and that's all you care about?" It came out a tad cynical, which he instantly regretted.

Savi's eyes widened suddenly, and for a moment he looked poised to shuffle away from Fen. But he quickly regained his composure, before speaking defiantly.

"It still is important, you know… if we don't do this mission, we need to pay Faoz actual rent until we can get another one done. Did you realise that? I barely have the money to bail one of us out, let alone two or three. And I believe you and Ryu spent all *your* money yesterday. So unless you're okay sleeping out in the open… we need to do something." He paused, then added, "Depending on how long we spend here, we might have to sleep outside anyway."

Fen sighed, knowing Savi was right. Their money situation hadn't ever occurred to him. But regardless of which task they prioritised, it seemed all they could do in this light was wander around hopefully. Surely there was a better way…

He considered calling out for Ryu, but didn't know if that would alert other Pokémon. Maybe it could be a last resort. As he thought, he found himself inspecting the fronds on the Ivysaur's back. It was funny how the big leaves held Savi's bud so securely in place. He hadn't seen leaves like that on any tree he could remember…

That particular musing stuck with him, for reasons he couldn't grasp. *Am I missing something here?* he wondered. They needed a way to search that was more efficient than just going on foot… but if they could somehow see more… *wait, what was I just thinking about? Trees? I can climb trees! Maybe if I got high enough on one, I could get a view of the whole wood, and we might spot Ryu or a scarf… hopefully both.*

He had a quick look around for a good one to scale. While height was difficult to judge in the fog, a particularly gnarled, thick tree-trunk just ahead looked a good bet.

He quickly explained his plans to Savi, who sounded optimistic enough, with no better suggestions. Fen scrambled up the trunk until he reached roughly two-thirds of its height. Even in the darkness it wasn't much of a challenge.

The fog that they had struggled with stopped after only a few feet of climbing, but it annoyingly formed a kind of opaque blanket, impossible to see to the ground from. It took him a few seconds to realise that the *sky* was what he could now make out above the trees. It was difficult to judge the time, but it was at least still light. *Hopefully we can get out of here before night falls.*

Looking around, he saw two small patches of light from opposite directions. One was from the direction they had entered the wood - he assumed it to be the same entrance - while the opposite light looked slightly closer. He lingered, trying to catch sight of a white scarf, or a blue-black creature, yet if they were both on the ground somewhere, locating them seemed impossible. He sighed. The only thing he'd managed to find was their bearings to the wood's exits, and even that was uncertain.

Defeated, he made a move to climb down again. His leg found a thin tree branch, which duly snapped under his weight. He didn't lose balance, but in the eerie silence of the wood, the snapping rang out all around him. Then a sudden ruffling of wings made him freeze. It sounded nearby… but this high up? What could it be?

He didn't have to wait for an answer, as a wing slashed into his arm, making him cry out in shock. He hurriedly did a half-climb, half-drop descent to the floor, where Savi already seemed to have sense the danger, securing the bag on his back. The cries didn't relent as Fen landed.

Then a swarm of Zubat burst out from the fog above. Savi yelped, and he spun his head around rapidly, seemingly in search of something. One of his vines sprung out and latched onto a twig about a foot in length. As the Zubat closed in, Savi's body arched

forwards as he hurled the twig into the darkness. It made a hollow *tok* sound as it hit a tree.

At this, the Zubat made a few confused-sounding noises, heads turning in the direction of the tree. Fen didn't understand what was happening, but he thought best to copy Savi's behaviour, the Ivysaur standing as still as a Shuckle.

The Zubat began cautiously flying to the source of the new sound, and Savi spoke to Fen quietly. "We need to run, right now. Did you see a way out?"

Fen quickly exchanged looks and nodded. With Savi beside him, he dropped to all fours and dashed in the direction of the light he had seen in the distance - the *wrong* light, he realised too late. The twig distraction had taken the Zubat towards their original entrance, which forced them the other way.

It wasn't long before the Zubat realised they'd been tricked, their harsh cries returning. Fen would've been more confident in losing them had he been running alone, but he had to stick with Savi, and the Ivysaur's thick legs were struggling to keep pace with Fen's galloping. Between them they kept up a pace just quick enough to keep their pursuers at arm's length. At least, that was what Fen thought - he didn't dare glance behind them. *If we just keep this up until the end of the wood,* he thought hopefully, *maybe they'll stop pursuing us? It's out of their habitat, after all…*

He didn't want to gamble on that, so they kept up a high speed as the clearing ahead got nearer. It was only when they were at the wood's end, close enough to make out the other side of the light, that he and Savi simultaneously yelped.

The wood stopped just before the end of a cliff edge, below which stood a drop of at least 20 metres, an icy blueness looming. *The sea! Water! I have to-*

With faster reflexes than he'd thought possible, Fen almost tripped over his legs trying to stop himself, and tumbled over onto his side, inches from the cliff edge. Beside him, Savi had rammed his vines into the ground, and released himself just before the momentum threw him the opposite way like a slingshot. He was thrown onto his back, quickly using his vines to help right himself.

Still the cries of Zubat didn't stop. They had nowhere else to go.

"Fen, I don't know if we can do this…" Savi panted. "There's no way we can fight so many of these. If I could put them all to sleep, we might be able to get away, but you'd fall asleep too, and I can't just carry you out of here…"

Savi can induce sleep…? How? At the same time as that thought, Fen looked around desperately for an escape route. The cliff was at a dead end, so trying to navigate a route around it seemed the only alternative to running back where they'd came. But his water fears, Savi's climbing limitations, and the fact that the Zubat may well catch them *anyway* were reasons to doubt that plan.

Then his eyes picked up a thin, white object buried under a rubble of rocks just next to him. It looked like a kind of fabric… almost like…

It took a moment for his mind to unscramble itself. *This… this is the scarf! It must be!* He pulled it from the rubble, and though it was faint, he felt it exude… something. It was a strange kind of pressure on his hand, but though he didn't understand it, it surely confirmed that the object was special.

Their winged pursuers were getting louder. He stared at the scarf again. A third option for their escape now occurred to him. *Fight them off?*

He hurriedly tied the fabric in a rough knot around his neck. "Fen…?" Savi said again, before noticing the scarf on him. "Wait… is that…?"

Fen didn't answer. He got to his feet, feeling a sudden air of confidence, and faced the oncoming Zubat. He had no idea what to expect from the scarf, but the effect was startling, and disorientating. The world seemed to subtly shift in perspective, and he felt strangely heavier, but also lighter. As if his mind had previously been clouded and had just been wiped with a cloth. He didn't have time to make sense of it. He took some steps away from the perilous cliff and composed himself.

Watching the Zubat approach seemed to take place in slow motion. Counting five of the 'mon, he didn't simply observe them; he knew all their flight trajectories, where they were planning to strike him. The biggest, presumably the pack's leader, noticed Fen first and swooped down to attack. Fen shifted his weight to the right at the last moment, sending the confused creature past him, flapping about trying to correct itself. As it flailed, he was perfectly placed to spin and fire an ember at it, simultaneously assaulting it with scratches for good measure. When the Zubat was down, he sensed two of the others behind him. He pivoted again and noted they were approaching from his left and right respectively. He dove forwards when they were close, so they flew harmlessly over his head, which also moved him further from the cliff. As he faced the Zubat again, he was pleased to Savi had already trapped one of the pair in his vines.

The second Zubat was preparing to launch another attack, but there were still two more behind Fen that were yet to make a move. He glanced back and forth, waiting for the Zubat facing him to be close enough, and those behind to be descending towards him; then he jumped up to meet the first Zubat's trajectory, grappling with its wings in the air before brutally roasting it with fire at close range. It dropped to the ground instantly, while the two other Zubat had missed him. *That should be three down,* he thought, *leaving just the task of -*

A thin, tough object suddenly crunched into the back of the neck, stunning him. He heard a screech from behind him, lower pitched and more growly than those of the Zubat before. There were

squeals, then a mad flapping of wings as their original pursuers retreated.

He groaned, feeling a dull ache in his neck already, but as he tried to pull himself to his feet, he discovered with alarm that his arms and legs could barely move. He had known this before, from when he had been paralysed… but this didn't seem to be the same. His limbs were screaming with fatigue.

After a couple of tries he forced himself to his knees, but it was a supreme effort to even do that. He was baffled. Whatever had hit him was sturdy, but it had hardly felt worse than any other attack he had suffered so far. Plus, he was only hit in the neck, not anywhere else that suddenly felt drained of energy.

Raising his head, he saw the back of a flying beast of a Pokémon, its wings alone standing a good five feet tall. It snarled viciously at Savi, who was backed desperately against the cliff's edge. Fen could only watch as the Golbat flew and slashed Savi across the face with a wing, then lunged towards him again, mouth open. Savi threw himself to his left with surprising agility, just managing to evade the jaws.

Fen couldn't understand why Savi wasn't trying to fight back, his face only burning with an intense concentration. Then there was a *pop,* and he saw a seed, miniscule in size, shoot into the air between Savi and the Golbat. As soon as it did, Savi hared off towards Fen and towards the wood.

A moment later, the seed cracked open and green spores exploded out of it, engulfing both the Golbat and Savi. Savi burst clear of them and yelled at Fen to "come on!" He duly tried running, and despite it being a slow and painful process, he just about managed.

The Golbat appeared a second later, still aiming for Savi. Its movements were laboured though, wings beating increasingly slow. Before it could reach them, its wings stopped altogether, eyes

drooped shut, and it hit the grassy surface with a *thump.* A roar that it had attempted came out as more of a whine.

Back inside the wood, Savi had overtaken Fen, and it took the Grass Pokémon a moment to realise he wasn't catching up. "What's happened?" Savi demanded as he stopped, voice resembling some state between worry and exasperation.

"I don't know!" Fen gasped, falling to his knees. "I'm exhausted, I can barely move… but I wasn't hit that hard…"

He checked his body for any noticeable cuts, markings, *anything*, but found nothing other than a few impact bruises. His eyes eventually focused on the scarf dangling from his neck. *This doesn't feel so useful anymore,* he thought miserably, before that triggered a realisation. *Wait… surely the scarf isn't doing this to me? Is that possible?*

He hurriedly untied it and gasped as he felt the relief of a great pressure being lifted from him, as if he'd dropped a heavy weight. Holding the scarf in his hand still gave off that aura he had felt when first picking it up.

Savi noticed his reaction, and muttered, "Don't tell me… the scarf-"

"Looks like it," Fen answered concisely, before finding an extra energy in his legs that he thought was lost, climbing back to his feet. "Let's run?"

Savi agreed, and they hurriedly stashed the scarf in Ryu's bag before taking off. There were no signs of life behind them as they ran, which suggested the Golbat was either still sleeping peacefully, or had lost them entirely. Either probability was enough to be content with.

Eventually they stopped and sheltered under a thick tree. After a few minutes of silence confirmed their safety, they munched through

most of the food they had packed, leaving one portion by unspoken consent.

Eventually, Savi said, "Looks like you found *the scarf,* then."

Fen chuckled weakly, then stopped, remembering the near horror of their situation.

"What did it… *do* to you, exactly?" Savi asked, with a hint of disbelief. "It was amazing to watch, even though I was a little distracted."

Fen tried to describe it in the thoughts he'd had in that brief moment; the clear-headedness he'd felt, then the ability to dodge the Zubats' attacks effortlessly. Savi listened attentively.

"I suppose… it's good that we have it now, in case there's a situation like that again," Savi said afterwards. "But for emergencies only."

"Definitely."

"I didn't know scarves had that… paralysing effect on 'mon, if your interpretation of events is right," Savi added. "I've never worn one before, and I don't remember Scout mentioning it yesterday…"

"That's true…" Fen's expression soured as he thought about it. *Why wouldn't Scout tell us that? If I hadn't thought to take the scarf off, I dread to think what would've become of us. Did he know about the dangers of this wood as well, but just lied about it? Was he* trying *to put us in danger?*

"Hey! Fen, just uh, calm down a little, could you?" Savi interrupted his thoughts, sounding oddly jumpy.

Fen hesitated, confused at his behaviour. "… Why?"

"Well… maybe you didn't notice, but your tail flared up just then. It happened earlier too, when we were arguing about whether to look

for Ryu or the scarf." Savi shifted uncomfortably. "Only because I'm sitting quite close to you here, and I'm naturally a bit scared of fire…"

Fen suddenly understood. *That was why Savi looked scared for a moment earlier. Makes sense. But my tail…* He sighed in exasperation. *It flares up whenever I'm angry? How wonderful… I guess Ryu never saw reason to mention that to me.*

He apologised quickly. "I just didn't know what to do about Ryu disappearing."

Savi looked to have calmed himself and gave a slight smile. "It's fine."

"And also," Fen said sheepishly, "that time when I caught your vines with my embers…"

Savi chuckled. "It was my fault for trying to leech that Ghost," he replied. "Should've known that's how you would attack. But… please try not to burn me again… it's awful."

"I… actually, I can't imagine it," Fen said, correcting himself just in time. He assumed he couldn't burn himself.

He had a quick look around, for no particular reason. While he saw no objects or Pokémon of interest, he noticed something different about their surroundings.

"The fog's cleared a little," he said. "And it's gotten brighter in here."

Savi peered out at the wood and hummed approval. "I'd bloody hope so," he muttered, eliciting a smile from Fen. "Especially if it's the fog that's bringing about all these Ghosts."

One of his paws beat the ground restlessly. "Do you want to try climbing another tree? I know it didn't exactly work first time, but it still sounds like our best bet of finding Ryu. Now that we have the scarf, too."

"Right." Fen clapped his hands together, then winced when he realised the acute sound might alert more Zubat. A few nervous moments duly passed without event. "I'll be more careful this time."

He began climbing the trunk of the tree they had been leaning against, reaching a similar height to his first climb. At first, he only saw the same two rays of light that had marked the wood's two entrances. The fog, though shallower, still made it difficult to make out much of the surface.

Determined not to give up, he scanned his eyes intently over the mist, eventually landing upon an oddity on his right. There was an area where the fog seemed to dip inexplicably downwards into the ground, as if something was trying to cover it up. Intrigued, he thought about how to reach this fog-dip. On the ground it might not be visible to them, and even if it was, they would have to stumble through a lot of existing fog before they got there.

He caught sight of a branch from another tree hanging tantalisingly near, lying between him and the dip. He got a sudden urge to leap across to it.

Is this another one of my instincts? he pondered. *Well, they've mostly served me well up to now… and travelling in this way would be more accurate than walking…*

Fen scrambled down to Savi and told him to follow his lead from above. He hoped it would be that simple, but Savi pointed out that he couldn't see him so high up due to the blanketing fog. They settled on Fen scrambling down every few trees to make sure Savi was following.

He climbed back up to the tree, then checked his position again. After making sure his arms and legs were positioned properly, though they seemed to take care of that themselves, he jumped.

He managed to suppress a squeal as he latched onto the new branch, legs left hanging in the air. But he had landed. *That felt*

good, he thought, satisfied. *Heh, aren't trees great?*

Another firm-looking branch lingered ahead, and he made the jump much easier this time. Soon enough, he barely had to think about finding handholds as he headed towards the dip.

When he was over it, he suddenly questioned the wisdom of his plan. What if this… peculiarity was just a ploy by a particularly sneaky wild Pokémon, looking for prey? He tried to shake it out of his mind. *The only Pokémon we've found here other than Ghosts have been in the air, not in the dirt.*

He intended to land right next to the dip, but misjudged his positioning, and one of his feet twisted awkwardly as he landed, pain shooting through it. He cursed, then winced as he quickly pulled himself up. The fog was concealing a hole in the ground! It was about 4 to 5 feet in diameter, if he had to guess.

Without a torch now, he cautiously positioned himself to try and get a good look at the hole through his tail flame. Before he could though, there was a ruffling of movement inside, making him shuffle backwards in panic. A head suddenly appeared, its sharp red pupils coming into focus first. They looked at Fen so startled that for a moment he was stunned too.

Just as Fen was about to speak, the figure yelped and plummeted back below the surface. Confused, Fen spun behind him and was met with a new Ghost, this one a small, grey cone-shaped thing with luminous eyes. It screeched, then threw itself at him.

Though it was a small creature, the tackle packed some weight behind it, and Fen fell to the ground briefly before scrambling back up. He shivered. The feeling of a Ghost Pokémon contacting him wasn't one he was keen to relive. Drawing on another ember, he forced his enemy back a little, before the bottom half of the Ghost's body violently jerked outwards towards him, a volley of seeds pummelling it from behind. It cried out weakly as it evaporated into the air, revealing its defeater.

"Thanks, Savi," Fen panted, the Ivysaur standing opposite him looking similarly worn-out.

"Just… don't move through the trees so fast next time," Savi replied, though he looked in good spirits.

I must've gotten carried away with that… Fen reflected. He leaned back over to the hole the figure had disappeared to. He knew who it was now; the yelp was unmistakable.

"… Ryu?" he asked quietly. There was no response. "Look… we beat all the Ghosts… there aren't any more here." *I really hope that's true, for both our sakes…*

A head peeked out of the darkness. It held out a paw to Fen, the back of which had a silvery bump. Fen sighed in relief, though slightly confused at Ryu's behaviour. He held out a hand of his own, which Ryu took before throwing his other around Fen's back in an embrace.

Ryu wasn't crying, but there were plenty of signs that he already had; his eyes were puffy, he sniffed constantly, and shivered despite his hold on Fen. His breathing got calmer with time, but he said nothing, which worried Fen. Eventually he asked, "Ryu… what happened to you?"

Ryu pulled away from him. He faltered on his first attempt, before managing to say: "The Ghosts… I had a f-feeling, just before they appeared, of what was happening… but I was too scared to say it then… I didn't want to believe it. When I tried to attack that first one and realised what it was, that I couldn't hit it… I just freaked out. When I was little, I got attacked by one once… I was so scared then…"

"What?!" Fen said, alarmed. "Were you okay?"

Ryu nodded miserably. "I wasn't on my own… but when I looked up and saw that *thing's* face, laughing at me… that fear came back, and

I just… ran. I had no idea where I was going. I could still *hear* them, but I couldn't hide, but I thought… if I could get underground, maybe they wouldn't reach me."

He showed Fen his paws, who gasped as he saw they were cracked, smeared with blood. "I don't even know how to dig properly," he said, offering the slightest of smiles. It quickly disappeared. "But it was something. I just hid in there, shaking and crying… thinking about what a failure I've been."

"Hey, that's not true!" Fen asserted.

"Of course it is!" Ryu cried back. "I've failed. No one just runs away from their fears like I did… it's pathetic."

Fen did his best to provide some words of comfort. "Ryu… I have fears as much as you do. And Savi." Savi nodded helpfully. "You shouldn't feel bad about it."

"Well, I do," Ryu snapped decisively. He looked at them for a second, then asked, "D'you know how to get out of here?"

Fen explained how his tree-climbing method showed him the wood's entrance. He hoped that would cheer Ryu up a bit to hear about, but the Riolu's despondent expression didn't change.

"Okay," he murmured when Fen had finished. "Let's go."

Fen was confident enough in his sense of direction to walk with the others on the ground. The fog around them gradually faded as they neared the exit, with natural darkness more of a barrier to their sight now.

Fen walked close to Ryu the entire time, thinking he could do with some company. He just wished he could figure out what to *say.* He'd never seen Ryu so miserable; his eyes didn't lift from towards the ground, and his feet dragged through the damp floor as if he could hardly will them to move.

Knowing Ryu's volatility, Fen thought, *maybe it's best that I don't say anything… but I can't believe he can be this unhappy about simply losing a fight, or running away from one.* He thought about Ryu's reaction to simply using the wrong move against the Ninjask they had fought. *Why is he so competitive about fighting? I'll have to ask another time. I just hope he feels better tomorrow…*

Once out of the wood, they agreed by largely unspoken consent to stay the night in the rock shelter Ryu had created earlier. It was hardly ideal sleeping conditions, but the prospect of a three hour walk back to the town didn't sound like much fun in their exhausted states. And, as Savi reasoned, out here was a better alternative to the wood itself, as they were protected should it suddenly flare up with Ghosts again.

They cleared out the debris to leave as much space as possible, then consumed the rest of the food and water they had. They had intended the majority for Ryu, but he only ate a few bites.

Fen found a nice sleeping position against a contour of the rock, and was just drifting into unconsciousness… when…

He spluttered himself awake, panting for air. He felt a rush of anxiety so strong that he scrambled out of the cave, suddenly feeling claustrophobic. The grass outside was too wet to sit in, so he ran over to another nearby rock and got on top of it. He ran his hands through his tail flame, the same technique he'd used to calm himself… when this happened before.

This… this happened again! That's the third time…

The fundamental emotion he'd felt was the same as before - fear. But there was something more to it this time. He'd felt… a sense of urgency, and a deep worry - the cause of which, he couldn't discern. What could it mean? What did any of this mean?

It didn't help that the power of this 'emotion attack', as he coined it, had been heftier than the previous two. He'd initially *acted* as terrified as those emotions communicated.

Taking some deep breaths, he looked down at his shaking hands. *What happened to me?* he thought forlornly. *What did I do for all this to fall on me… and what's happening to me* now *?*

He was determined, desperate even, to make sense of the emotion attacks. Surely they couldn't be normal, for Pokémon or humans. *Whichever one of those I am now…*

A ruffling from behind, more striking in the night's silence, made him turn his head. Ryu slowly walked out of their shelter onto the grass, tiptoeing around Savi's bulky frame. He wearily rubbed an eye, and gazed out towards Fen, sitting opposite.

"What are you doing?" Ryu hissed.

Fen realised how strange his behaviour must have looked. He hesitated over how to answer. "Are you… feeling alright?" he asked Ryu, conscious of his earlier state.

Ryu let out a *hmph* noise, something between a groan and a sigh. "It's been a bad day," he mumbled. "Just explain what's going on, yeah?"

So Fen told him everything about the emotions he'd felt - how the feeling had hit him twice before, and how its increasing intensity was affecting him. He explained as best he could, but such a non-physical experience was difficult to find words for.

Ryu thought for a while once he was done. He had listened attentively but still looked awfully down, and his low tone of voice suggested as much. "I've never heard of anything like what you're saying. Especially just before going to sleep. That's… weird."

"That's what I thought," Fen said, feeling strangely relieved. "It sounds ridiculous trying to explain it."

"Yeah," Ryu agreed. "Not sure many 'mon would take you seriously if you told 'em about it."

"Huh…" Fen lowered his head, the thought filling him with sadness. He didn't that doubt Ryu was telling him the truth. "Thanks for believing me, in that case."

Ryu gave him a reassuring look. "You said it made you fearful?" he said.

"The emotions? Yeah."

"Well, what with the storm earlier, then those Ghosts appearing… you're not alone in feeling that today."

"Heh…" Fen paused, thinking. *Hold on. This attack* did *happen after the storm today. The first attack happened the night following the storm in Cheri Forest. And the second attack the night after the earthquake. All of them after an extreme weather event? Something* has *felt wrong about them… people were saying earthquakes here were unheard of, for a start.*

He told Ryu this, but the Riolu seemed unsure. "So… what? You think these weather events are linked with whatever it is you've got?"

"Unless you have a better idea, then… yes. I feel like these thoughts are trying to communicate *something* to me… and given how it makes me feel, it must be important. What if there's a bigger reason for these natural disasters? What if it's something do to with *me* ?"

Ryu's head was lowered, but Fen could just make out him smiling thinly. "You probably think I'm insane," Fen muttered.

Ryu chuckled at that; it was the happiest Fen had heard him for a good while. "Not at all," he replied. "What I understand of your life *so*

far is insane enough." He turned to face Fen and spoke seriously. "What do you want to do, then? Stop these natural disasters?"

"I…" Fen froze. The thought hadn't occurred to him yet, but it seemed obvious now Ryu had said it. There was no doubt the disasters were bad, and if his intuitions were correct, they would only continue. So they needed to be stopped. Plus, he *had* sensed urgency in his most recent emotion attack. Was it an urgency to stop the disasters?

"Yes… it seems like that's what I need to do," he said. "But how?"

Ryu mulled over this but didn't have an answer. Then a new idea came to Fen.

"We can't bend the elements to our will… but if we find out what's *causing* these problems, then…" he nearly jumped with excitement as his thoughts suddenly linked together. "We could look for the Absol we saw in the forest! It's the disaster *Pokémon*, it must be able to tell us something about why they're happening. And if I get any more of these emotion attacks, they might help me understand too. And all of this might explain how or why I'm here in the first place!"

Ryu looked doubtfully at him. "That's still not much to go on…"

Fen refused to believe it. "Someone in Sanguin Town must know about Absol, I can't imagine that *no one* does. We could find out where to find one there. Once we get the reward from this mission, we could buy whatever else we need for this journey… assuming the reward is as good as Scout said it was… and then we could…"

He stopped. *We.* He'd been saying the word absent-mindedly, so used to him and Ryu travelling together. If he was going to do this - leave town, set out to end the natural disasters - he had just assumed the Riolu would be with him. But there was no reason to expect that, especially given how Ryu had been today. His excitement crashed down to earth.

"You don't have to come with me, Ryu," he murmured. "I… was probably getting ahead of myself anyway. I don't know if all this will be possible…"

Ryu gave him an amused look. "Let's see how your plan goes first, eh?" he said, a little more cheerfully.

"Yeah…" Fen was interrupted by a huge yawn. He blinked a few times, suddenly aware again of how exhausted he was. The adrenaline he'd gotten from the rush of emotions was wearing off. "You're right. I should worry about this tomorrow. Right now, sleep."

Ryu chuckled a little. They jumped down from the rock, and quietly returned to their own shelter. Mercifully, Fen didn't have any problems sleeping this time.

Departure

As soon as dawn illuminated the cracks in their hollowed rock, the three of them got moving. Sleep, Fen had been delighted to learn, did wonders for physical fatigue. And given Ryu was much chirpier when they woke, it seemed to do mental fatigue some good, too.

The low sun was dazzling at first, making the grass glisten with the night's water dew. But Fen couldn't be gladder for it after the wood's perpetual murkiness. Something about being in the sun's glare felt wonderfully compelling, and seemed to fill him with energy. He hoped the sky would stay clear of clouds for a while yet.

But as they continued through the long valleys, he realised that in the midst of his and Ryu's planning last night, he had completely forgotten about Savi. The main reason he had asked Savi if he'd like to take on yesterday's mission with them was because of how down he'd looked about his friend Lucxa. He worried how the Ivysaur would feel if he and Ryu suddenly upped stakes too.

Before disclosing anything though, there was something he wanted to gauge.

"Savi, who do you think's the most knowledgeable Pokémon in Sanguin Town?" he asked.

"Most knowledgeable?" Savi considered aloud. "I'm not the best 'mon to ask, but I'd probably say Faoz. She seems to know everything."

That made sense, given the Floatzel processed all the information about different Pokémon's jobs and whereabouts. And she'd given them their map of Kyunn. *Running her lodgings-guild place must be a hell of a job,* Fen though. *Keeping track of who's staying, sorting out missions, managing finances… no wonder she looks exhausted whenever we see her.*

"Why do you ask exactly?" Savi probed.

"Well, I'm… looking for someone," Fen said carefully. "I don't know exactly where to find them, but I think it'll be somewhere beyond Sanguin Town."

Savi slowed his walking. "You're leaving?" he said, looking confused. "Didn't you only arrive in town a couple of days ago?"

Fen wasn't sure how to answer, but Ryu quickly took over for him.

"We were always planning to leave after this mission," he said. "Just didn't want to say yesterday. Thought we should concentrate on one thing at a time."

Fen raised his eyebrows at Ryu. *I suppose it's a better excuse than whatever I would've come up with… though it doesn't feel great to be lying to Savi.*

"That is okay with you, right?" Fen said when Savi was silent for a while.

"Oh, 'course." Savi shrugged. "I've only known you from since you arrived, after all."

"I mean… you could always come with us!" Fen offered. "Once we work out where we're going, anyway…"

In his peripheral vision he noticed Ryu glance quizzically at him as if to ask, 'are you sure?' Fen couldn't judge whether that was because Ryu didn't entirely trust Savi - which seemed illogical given how well he'd fought the previous day - or that he was more concerned about the number of secrets they were keeping from him. *If Savi did come with us, I think I'd have no choice but to tell him who I am and what happened to me,* Fen thought. *If we're a team, we shouldn't be hiding anything.*

"If it's anywhere far, I probably shouldn't," Savi said. "Need to see how Lucxa's doing. I… haven't seen him for a couple of days now. Just thinking about how he was is making me a bit anxious…"

"Oh," Fen said. "I understand."

"Still, I'm interested in what Faoz has to say, if that's who you're talking to," Savi said, smile returning. "And I might be able to help you out with something. We'll see."

They arrived back in town just as the sun was reaching its peak. The short grass here was also damp underfoot, and many of the wood-made homes greeting them looked to still be drying off, water dripping off the edges of roofs. Fen had questioned the wisdom of wood as a construction material before, so he couldn't help feeling a little smug as he overheard murmurings around town of some residents' roofs soaking through.

Looks like the storm passed through the Sanguin Town too. And this was after Cyan had told him that anything other than mild weather in the town was a rarity. Nothing looked to have collapsed, which suggested the storm that had hit couldn't have been too serious; at least not as strong as it had felt in the mountains. Still, it strengthened his suspicions that the recent peculiar weather wasn't mere coincidence.

They agreed to seek out Faoz before doing anything else, and Savi led them expertly through the town's twisting, poorly designed alleyways to her building. However, Faoz herself wasn't present at the entrance desk, nor her daughter Buin. The whole desk was bare.

"Hmm," Savi mused. "I've never been at the guild this time of day. She might be in her back room?" He gestured to a door just behind the desk which, as usual, operated on a no-handle system.

Ryu gingerly pushed the door open, and they were met with a surprising sight. Faoz and Buin were both present, but they were

soundly asleep, passed out on a furry rug that looked strangely… damp, and surely not very comfortable. There was a smaller desk here, stuffed with piles of small, scruffy papers as well as several handfuls of coins scattered on one side. Fen's eyes were curiously drawn to a corner of the room where a closed chest sat, being held shut by a metal seal. It was a rare mark of privacy among the Pokémon here. Elsewhere, there was a low bowl filled with berries and roots; a travel bag that had a broken strap and numerous rips in the fabric; and hanging on one wall was a long yellow device, suspiciously similar in shape and length to the object Faoz wrapped around herself all day, though this one looked deflated.

The light streaming into the room didn't wake either of the pair, so Ryu slammed the bumps of his paws together a couple of times, making a piercing metallic clang.

"Ryu… why?" Fen asked in disbelief. "Isn't it rude to wake someone like that?"

Ryu shrugged. "It's midday," he said, as if that provided total closure.

A moment later, they heard Faoz growl an irritated sounding "Yes?" She didn't seem that angry at being woken, judging by the little reaction shown, but her sleepy frown suggested she wasn't happy about it either. She propped herself up on her stubby arms to get a better look at the three of them.

"Did you get back late from somewhere?" she asked, a little friendlier in tone. *She must recognise us then,* Fen thought, relieved. They communicated a 'yes' in response, then Fen cleared his throat to speak, and almost coughed out a little fire doing so. Luckily, it was only smoke. *That was close…*

"Sorry to wake you up like this Faoz," he began, "but could you help us out with something? There's a couple of questions that we thought you might know answers to, being as knowledgeable as you are…"

Faoz half-smiled at the complement. "I'll see what I can do. But we'd better talk outside here," she said, gesturing at a curled-up Buin for the reason why.

Back at the main desk, Faoz trudged to her usual seat behind it, while the three of them crowded awkwardly around the small space.

"Has it been busy here recently?" Fen asked, partly curious but also keen to gain some rapport with Faoz before he bombarded her with questions. "I saw there was some rainfall recently, if that contributed…"

Faoz chuckled shortly. "It's been madness," she said, shaking her head. It was still damp, but she didn't attempt to dry it. "There's been all sorts going on since that earthquake happened; it's like no one's brave enough to do their own jobs anymore. This place has had more mission requests in the last two days than I've ever known. In the end, just after dawn, I had to say, 'no more'. Buin and I were up all night sorting them."

"Oh…" Fen murmured. *I really feel bad for waking her now…* "Do you get… overworked quite often?"

Faoz smiled. "It's been hard work ever since I started the place up, but never that bad. I suppose a day like yesterday would inevitably happen eventually, but even so… I wished it didn't have to." She sighed, then swiftly moved on. "You're right, it did rain last night. Very unusual. Luckily most of the 'mon living here have houses either made of clay or with thatched roofs like this one, so it wasn't catastrophic. I've no doubt it contributed to the surge of jobs, though."

She paused for a moment. "What did you want to ask?"

It was an unspoken agreement between Fen and Ryu that Fen would be doing the talking, if only for the fact that their whole enquiry was his own idea. Firstly, he hoped for some clarity on yesterday's events.

"Yesterday we went to a place called Hidden Wood. Before we went inside, there was a rainstorm which seemed really heavy and unusual for the area. When we did go in the wood, there was this weird mist covering the ground, and we got attacked by Ghost Pokémon, which we weren't told would be there…"

Faoz certainly had her interest piqued now. "Show me this place you went to?" she asked.

They unfurled the map and pointed out the circle drawn by Scout. She examined it closely, murmuring something about not knowing the name, before speaking.

"I don't think Scout lied to you about the 'mon he thought were in the wood. The thing about Ghosts is, they're not like other 'mon. They don't *have* defined habitats, they just… float around. They bring a fog with them whenever they appear, and that same fog disappears when you defeat them. Plus, from what I know they're never anything approaching civil. They'll attack anyone they see, always."

Fen glanced over at Ryu, expecting him to be squirming with the subject matter, but was surprised to see him steely focused on Faoz. Ghosts were clearly a subject of intense interest to him.

"How do they appear in the first place?" Fen queried.

"No one's sure exactly," Faoz said. "They normally come out at night, and tend to favour caves or areas deprived of natural light."

Fen supposed the wood *could* meet that criteria, but it was tenuous.

"Ghosts appearing in response to a storm is certainly a new theory, though," Faoz continued.

"Do you think it's possible?" Fen asked.

"I can't think of a better reason for your encounter, so it could be." She frowned. "Sorry that you had to deal with them. Ghosts are

horrible for anyone."

Fen hadn't been sure himself on the idea that the storm had caused the Ghosts' appearance, but he thought it was useful to keep in mind. "It's fine. The other question I've got is… do you know much about Absol? Where we might find one, say…?"

Faoz's black eyes widened for a second, then stared fiercely back at Fen. "That's… a dangerous question to ask."

"What?" Fen stepped back, panicked. "Why?"

"I trust you know enough about Absol to know they're very rarely spotted, and for good reason. They're thought to be especially wild and hostile, even among Darks. I've never met one myself, but I wouldn't go looking. Why would you want to find one?"

Fen was stunned. In a few short sentences, Faoz had indirectly told him, clear as day, that the plan he'd hatched yesterday was a very bad idea. She had finished with more of a command than a question, but he had a stab at answering as confidently as he could.

"The earthquake, and the storms that have been happening… I think something's up with the world, somehow. I can't really tell you how, I just have this compulsion. I know Absol are supposed to warn other Pokémon of natural disasters, so if there is something to learn, I thought they would be the most likely source of answers."

Faoz nodded slowly, seeming to understand, but she still gave him a sceptical look. "You're right about Absol," she said. "I know what their supposed abilities are. But why do you think something's 'up with the world', just because of a few unusual events? I agree that it's unusual. I was as cautious as possible after the earthquake. But this is nature we're dealing with. It's not ours to try and understand."

Wow. That's… a very different opinion to the one I remember, Fen thought. *It fits with what I've learned about Pokémon, though, being*

very appreciative of nature. Natural science isn't given much consideration in their culture.

Faoz seemed pretty set on her position, so he thought better than to try and dispute it. Instead, he asked: "Do you know where we might find an Absol anyway?"

Faoz sighed, but her thin smile suggested she was entertained, and possibly impressed, by his persistence. "The only place I can think of is Darkrai's Knot."

"What?!" Savi and Ryu surprised Fen by both exclaiming in unison. Savi sounded particularly fearful at the name.

Fen looked around at them, confused. "Darkrai's Knot?"

"The most dangerous place on the island?" Savi asked him disbelievingly. "That's inside the biggest peak, right at the edge? Didn't your parents tell you about it… like never to go near it?"

Even if they did, I wouldn't know… Fen felt another pang of guilt about how much he was hiding from Savi. "I guess not," was all he could respond with.

"Well, Savi's already explained what I was going to point out," Faoz said. "Darkrai's Knot is a huge web of tunnels, built into a side of Glyciak Mountain, the highest known peak in Kyunn. It's where most Darks reside, which logically means Absol should live there too. Darks are probably the toughest family of 'mon there is, which is why they're gathered in such a harsh location."

"Why's it got such a foreboding name?"

A smile flashed across Faoz's face. "Something to do with Darkrai inducing nightmares in those it attacks, Darkrai supposedly being a Dark himself… maybe going there gives 'mon nightmares?" She shrugged. "Speculation. No one really believes Darkrai lives inside -

and I've never been there myself - but I do know it's precarious land. That's all."

"Okay," Fen said slowly. *Man, am I really considering this? Am I crazy? Well, I've gotten this far… may as well ask the next question.* "If we wanted to get there, how would we do it?"

Faoz considered for a moment, then put one of her hands on the map, and began sketching out a path with her paw. "The quickest way, for you two climbers at least-" She pointed to Fen and Ryu - "Would be to cross the smaller peaks on your way there. That would take you through Horizon, the Ractyl Belt, Arkan…"

"Arkan?" Fen repeated. "The volcano?"

"Aye, it sits in the middle of that big southern mountain range." She pointed out the vibrantly illustrated volcano on the map. "Look, directions won't be the biggest problem for you here; it'll be the journey itself. Very few 'mon travel beyond Arkan, for good reason."

Fen nodded. "Do you… know anything else about that area, other than the geography?"

"I didn't mark anything on the map you have," Faoz said. "But in the mountains I'd expect to see Rocks, Flyers, maybe Fires… the heights Glyciak reaches means there could be some Ices there too. Also-" she paused for a moment, looking uncertain. "No, I don't think that's a problem."

"Huh?"

"I was just going to add, in the harsher conditions there'll be more predators than around these parts. But I don't think either of you are in danger."

Fen stared at her in disbelief. "You're saying we might get hunted?"

"No!" she asserted, waving her arms for emphasis. "If any of you were a Bug, a fish-Water or a Common, I wouldn't let you go, but you're not. You'll be attacked because 'mon are territorial like anywhere else, but that's all. Don't worry about it."

Fen glanced to Ryu for reassurance, finding him nodding in agreement with Faoz. She's right, 'mon. I was taught the same thing." Fen trusted them both, but the talk of predators still made him anxious.

"Sorry I can't help you more," Faoz added, as his attention returned to her.

Fen shrugged it off. "You've been really helpful. Thank you."

Faoz smiled. "If you do decide to leave here, let me know before you disappear. Hardly anyone does… it's a nightmare to try and organise, especially given how busy I am now."

"I'll come back when I know," Fen said. Faoz seemed happy with that.

Meeting concluded for now, Fen, Ryu and Savi stepped out onto the grass outside.

"Before you say anything," Savi spoke first, "I… I can't believe you're really planning this, Fen! You're insane to try and make it to Darkrai's Knot… and for what cause? Trying to find a Pokémon that might not even live there? Trying to figure out the cause of these… weather events? It's the *weather* !"

Fen looked at him sadly, not entirely surprised. "Savi, I-"

"Look, forget about even persuading *me* to go… it's too far, and mountainous and… I don't like that stuff… but for *you two!* You're not the strongest 'mon in the world, no offense… so why do you want to do this? It's so dangerous!"

Fen had no good answer to that. All he had was a gut feeling that, despite all the danger, going to Darkrai's Knot remained the right thing to do. *But saying that will make me look even more crazier…*

"Hey, before we start arguing," Ryu cut in, "we've still got a scarf to return. And some kinda reward to collect from Scout. Reckon we should see where that leaves us first?"

Fen was grateful, again, for Ryu's intervention, for neither he nor Savi could disagree with him; they'd all earned the reward. He leaned over to Ryu as they started towards the town square, and asked quietly, "What do you think about this journey?"

"Well… it does sound pretty 'insane', as Savi put it," Ryu said with a wry smile. "But I'm certainly not *against* it, yet."

Fen felt a little reassured. *Maybe we're just both crazy.*

Walking down the streets of shops reminded Fen of the events that transpired the last time he was here. The Pokémon disguised as Savi that attacked him, suspected him of being involved with humans, and then ran off before he could understand what had prompted her… he felt uneasy thinking about it. After all, if she could disguise herself as an Ivysaur, could she disguise herself as *anything?* And by that logic, how did he know that *any* of the Pokémon he'd spoken two these last two days hadn't just been her in disguise-

His foot caught on a stray rock jutting out of the grassy path, making him stumble slightly. At least it brought his thoughts back to reality. *I've got enough to worry about already,* he reasoned. He expected a snarky comment from Ryu in response to his trip, but thankfully found the Riolu's eyes were only fixed thoughtfully into the distance. *Maybe he didn't notice.*

The market street was quiet, as they passed only the occasional Pokémon carrying bags of food or talking quietly. Fen was reminded

of what Faoz had said - 'no one's brave enough to do their own jobs anymore' - and on this evidence, she was right. The time of day meant most of the guild occupants would be out of town completing those jobs that all these *less brave* Pokémon weren't willing to. He couldn't blame them for preferring the safety of their homes, though.

Scout was in exactly the same position as when they met him two days ago: leaning against the door to his hut, eyes closed, mouth open, limbs sprawled on the ground. Ryu retrieved the scarf from his bag before giving an impatient knock on the storefront, which Fen could've sworn produced a smirk on Scout's face as he blinked his eyes open. Upon recognising the three of them he suddenly gained some urgency, leaping to the counter where they stood.

"What happened?" he asked quickly. "You've… been gone over a day. Did everything go all right?"

Given Scout had sent them to the wood, Fen thought it was only right for him to get an honest account of their struggles. Scout didn't interrupt at all, to Fen's surprise, until the point where he had put on the scarf.

"You actually *wore* it?" Scout asked him, a hint of concern in his voice. "How was it?"

"Uh…" Fen struggled with such a vague question. "I seemed to predict how the Zubat were going to attack in advance of them doing it… and could easily dodge out of the way as result."

"Mm," Scout nodded. "Evasion. That's what the scarf does. Quite amazing, huh?"

So that's *what the ability's called!* "It did help us fight them off… but once an attack *did* hit me, I seemed to lose all my energy and could barely move. When I took the scarf off I regained some of it, so I wondered…"

"You're right," Scout interjected. "Wearing any scarf will put a much greater strain on your body due to the powers they give you. I've found that you do get more used to the energy strain if you wear scarves frequently, but it's an unfortunate side-effect of using them, and the reason why you don't see them worn very often. Still, you must've-"

"So you knew?" Fen snapped. "Why didn't you tell us? That's surely the one thing we *had* to know about scarves, and you just let me think they were these… insane things that gave you powers with no drawbacks! Were you *trying* to hurt us?"

After his last comment, Scout's whole demeanour changed. His sky-blue eyes widened angrily at Fen, he rammed one of his bi-clawed paws into the counter, and leant forwards until his snout was merely inches from Fen's face. Fen had to fight the urge to recoil in fear.

"Don't *ever* accuse me of that again," Scout hissed at him through clenched teeth. "If my intention was to hurt 'mon, do you really think I'd still own this shop? Hm?" He held his furious gaze, seemingly expecting Fen to answer.

"No…?" Fen said shakily, unable to fully meet his eyes. "I apologise, Scout."

At this, Scout drew himself away from Fen again, his aggression evaporating. He mumbled "Mew" several times to himself before slumping his head heavily on the counter, eyes fixed downwards. He seemed disappointed with himself, staying in this position for a considerable time, during which Fen, Ryu and Savi silently exchanged various uncertain looks. Eventually Scout raised his head, though he didn't lift it off the surface. "In hindsight," he murmured, "I was wrong. You should've known the risks of scarves, even if your job was only to find one and bring it back."

"But… why didn't you tell us?" Fen repeated to him, with far less hostility. He wasn't sure what to make of Scout's recent behaviour. At least he seemed sorry.

"Because…" Scout sighed. "I'm a shopkeeper. My job is to sell these things. I'm going to emphasise the positives about scarves to try and attract your interest, then if you're still willing to buy, I'll make sure you're clear on the risks of them before you do. You three," he said, lazily poking a claw to their group, "are an exception since you weren't buying a scarf to wear, only looking for one. I had no idea that the wood would become as beset with Ghosts as you describe, so never thought the scarf would be *necessary* for you to merely escape unharmed."

He brooded for a moment, before adding: "It's such rough luck, what happened in the wood… I would never have sent you there if I knew. And…" His eyes flicked to Fen. "What's your name, Chimchar?"

Fen raised his eyebrows at the question. "Fen," he muttered, still feeling annoyed at Scout, even if he better understand the Linoone's reasons.

"Fen." Scout spoke slowly. "I should be the one apologising. You're perfectly justified to be angry. Now…" He paused, addressing the three of them again. "Do you still have the scarf?"

"Yeah," Ryu said coldly, evidently as displeased as Fen felt. He dropped it on the counter for Scout, whose eyes lit up upon seeing his treasure returned.

"Oh, awesome! Thanks so much. Let me uh… grab your reward real quick…"

He dove into the hut behind the store, clumsily fixing the wooden door shut. The muffled bangs and scuffling from inside gave Fen a strong feeling that Scout wasn't the organised type. When he did emerge again, he walked solely on his hind legs, slightly hunched. One of his paws clutched two small pouches which bulged with whatever was stowed inside. Fen found the sight of an obviously quadrupled creature moving on two feet rather disconcerting, but made no comment.

"I'll be honest," Scout said, "I wasn't originally going to reward you this much. But I do feel guilty about what happened, and for getting the scarf back despite all that, I really owe you one. So… let's see what's in here, eh?"

He emptied both bags out onto the counter. The first contained berries, the second seeds. Scout ran through them quickly, for the second time now, so they wouldn't be mixed up - he emphasised the importance of knowing their items' appearances, especially for the seeds. Fen could tell from his enthusiasm how much Scout loved this part of his job. *I'd feel pleased if I was an expert on so many rare items, too.*

"To summarise," Scout finished, "you've got three orans, two lums, two leppas, then one of each seed: sleep, stun, quick, blast and violent. And, since I heard you're meant to split something with the guild-" He produced a pawful of gold coins, dropping it with their items. "-here's 1000 poké on the side. So… there you are. Hope that's enough of a gift for your troubles. It's certainly a valuable one."

While Ryu just stood open-mouthed, Fen had no idea how to begin to respond. He had expected something good, but to this scale… *how much is this bundle even worth? It must be… thousands of poké! Scout really was sorry…*

"Whoa," Ryu muttered, echoing Fen's thoughts, before he burst into ecstatic laughter. "Aaaaaah! I can't believe this! Whatever you said before Scout, or didn't say, we totally forgive you. You're a hero!"

Scout chuckled. "Don't mention how you got hold of it all, though," he winked at them, then started loading the goods back into the pouches for them. He looked well back to the mischievous seller Fen had known before.

While Ryu and Savi were looking away, Fen said quietly to Scout, "I… should apologise too. I overreacted earlier."

"Hmph." Scout smirked. "I get it, we're all a bit wild sometimes. No hard feelings, right?"

"Uh… yeah. No hard feelings," Fen forced a smile, but he found the meaning of Scout's offhanded comment slightly disturbing, if he interpreted 'wild' as in the Pokémon sense. Then he remembered how he'd acted towards Savi when confused: growling, attacking with little reasoning, behaving like any wild Pokémon would. Scout had a point… but for the sake of his mental stability, Fen thought it best not to dwell on it much.

"What do you think of this?" he asked Ryu, re-joining them.

Ryu smiled and shook his head, still in awe of what they had. "I'm *so* down for finding some Absol now! I take it you still wanna go?"

Fen's strange conviction felt even stronger now. A few days ago, he might not have relied so much on his gut feeling, but he acknowledged that he was a Pokémon now and with that it was normal, maybe even recommended, to trust what his instincts told him. The answer had to be yes.

Ryu gave a cheer of delight when he said so, slapping him on the back for good measure.

Fen glanced at Savi, who answered at once. "I'm sticking by what I said."

Fen expected the decision, but it made him aware of an unfortunate situation Scout had placed them in. With Savi leaving, they needed to find a way to split their earnings fairly.

Savi was dismissive when he brought up the issue. "Oh, you can keep all that stuff," he answered breezily.

"What?" Fen stared at him. "Come on man, you deserve at least half of these rewards for how good you were yesterday."

Savi looked at him oddly. "What did you call me?"

It took Fen a moment before realising his mistake. *Crap! I need to stop speaking like humans… why do 'man' and 'mon' have to be such similar words? And how many times have I got them mixed up before?*

"Uh, nothing," he said quickly. *Great cover up, too. Ugh.*

"Okay, well… you two are set on this mad journey, right? I imagine you'll need those items much more than me."

Fen was about to object again, but Ryu spoke first. "What if we just gave you the money and we take the items? I don't think we'll be needing poké where we're going."

Savi frowned. "Don't you need to buy food, though?"

Ryu thought briefly. "We'll need a little, yeah, but we're going through Cheri Forest, which is like a free market."

"Ah." Savi nodded in understanding. "If you're happy to give me the rest, then that's great."

"'Course," Ryu said, seeming to agree on Fen's behalf as well. Fen couldn't help feeling guilty about leaving Savi with such an unfair measure of his contribution, given their items were worth far more than 1000 poké. But Savi was right; they would need as many items as they could carry.

They went to the food stalls run by Vigoroth, buying four apples - 'simply the best fruit,' Ryu argued - then gave the rest of their money, still a sizable portion, to Savi. There was an awkward pause as Fen expected the time was right to say goodbye, and Savi seemed to have the same idea. "I guess I'll leave you here," the Ivysaur said. He surprised Fen by cracking two vines from his bud and holding them out for him and Ryu.

Fen held his hand out to the vine and glanced at Savi quizzically, who laughed. "Yeah, take it. This is how we greet fellow Grasses, and friends. Shame neither of you have vines of your own, really."

He clutched the vine two-thirds of the way up, and found it wrap around his arm, like a handshake did, in a firm but friendly way. The warmth of the gesture made him smile.

"Good luck with the guild work," Fen said to him. "And… my best wishes to Lucxa."

Savi smiled. "Thanks. But you're the ones I should be wishing good luck. I hope it goes well for you… and, Mew, I'm sorry for getting so angry earlier. Whenever you come back, I'll buy you a smoothie or something."

Fen appreciated Savi's optimism that they would return, but he felt about as certain about it as if he were predicting a coin toss. Even if they found an Absol, who knew if they would ever see Sanguin Town again?

They refilled their water in a stream at the town's edge, sorted everything into their now weighty rucksack, then went back to see Faoz. Fen had forgotten that half their money would be split with the guild; when Faoz reminded them, he felt even more guilty about leaving Savi short-changed. When they told Faoz of their decision, she too wished them good luck, though the wary look she gave saying it told enough about how she rated their chances. She did at least map their route properly in ink with one of her paws.

Before they left the guild, Fen felt compelled to take one last look around the place that, for as long as his new memory had existed, he had come to know as home. It was nice to have a guaranteed bed while it lasted.

Admittedly, there wasn't much to see inside; there was the room they had slept in, which was deserted for the first time Fen could remember, owing to the time of day. All that remained in the bare

room were the hay beds they slept on and the fire-lizard torches hanging on the walls. Those looked sad without any flames inside them. Off a sudden whim, he breathed a wisp of fire into one, and though the flame was small it was enough to set the torch alight. He allowed himself a moment of pride at his meagre efforts. *Cyan would be proud… maybe.*

"Are you done here?" Ryu asked, apparently not sharing the same attachment to the wooden shack.

Fen wasn't sure if 'here' referred to the guild or the whole town, but he assumed both. "I just remembered that there's one more person I want to see."

Ryu nodded. As they left, he said, "D'you remember when you told me those words I had never heard before? Like… hour."

"I remember," Fen said. "You want to learn about them now?"

Ryu laughed, "No, 'mon. There's another one you do. Something called a 'person'?"

Fen sighed heavily. After his earlier mix-up with Savi, it made him weary to think about all the dialectical errors he could have been making. "Person means… it's like when you say 'mon. That's right, isn't it? 'Mon?"

"Yep," Ryu said with obvious amusement.

"I'll try and say *that* from now on, alright?"

Ryu nodded. "Good stuff. Who are you seeing, anyway?"

"Cyan."

If Ryu had eyebrows, Fen suspected he would've raised them. Instead his eyes just widened slightly. "She's that Fire you were fighting with a couple days ago?"

"Huh? I wasn't fighting with her…" Fen paused, realising Ryu's words were meant more literally than his natural interpretation. "Actually, I was. Never mind. There's something I wanted to ask her, yeah."

Fen tried to reverse the directions Cyan had given him the last time he'd been her house. It was to some satisfaction and more than a little surprise that he did arrive at her clay house with jagged edges. He thought it ironic that they were leaving the town just when he might be finding his bearings.

He knocked on the door and heard a pattering of legs before it was nudged open towards them. A small Growlithe was standing in the doorway.

"Heyo!" he said enthusiastically. "What's up 'char?"

Fen was momentarily thrown by the unexpected species, as well as the referral to him as 'Char'. *He must've met a few Chimchar before…?*

"I'm, uh, looking for Cyan?" he said hesitantly. "Is she here?"

"Yeah, she's downstairs. One sec!" The Growlithe galloped back into the house, stopping at the top of the staircase Fen had gone down the last time he was here. "CY-AN!" he shouted, his voice making it come out like more of a bark.

There was a muffled exchange from beneath the stairs, before the Growlithe reappeared and turned back to Fen at the door. "Hey, come in 'char!" he said, as they got closer. "What's your name?"

Fen and Ryu duly introduced themselves.

"Cool! I'm Rowla," the Growlithe replied. He immediately puffed a cloud of fire into the space between them. Fen remembered to do the same, but the result was still comparatively weak on his side. Rowla didn't seem to mind, though.

"… Cyan's brother," Rowla finished when the exchange was done.

Cyan emerged shortly afterwards, her fur looking ruffled. Fen realised then that Rowla's was too.

"Hey Fen!" she said brightly, sounding slightly out of breath. "How's it going?"

"Not bad," he smiled, her cheerfulness rubbing off on him. "Yourself?"

"Heh, well… I had the day off work, so you would *seem* to catch me at a good time, but you interrupted our fighting, so I don't know. Is there something you wanted?"

She sure loves fighting. "There is. I've got a question that I hoped you could explain, if that's alright." He couldn't resist asking another in the meantime. "What work do you do?"

"Oh, I just help out at the day-care in town," Cyan explained briefly. "It's okay, only every other day so not too taxing. Plenty of time for the important stuff, right?" She gestured to him to come in, leaving the nature of 'important stuff' ambiguous, though judging from her recent activities, Fen could hazard a guess.

He'd hardly had a glance at the upstairs of Cyan's house the last time he'd visited, and now he remembered why; it was essentially one compressed room. It looked like everything fixed in the interior was made of clay: a half-open cupboard revealed a tasty looking food collection, while there was a raised platform near it, blackened almost everywhere due to what he assumed were heat burns. *I suppose… they cook things there?* Trying to imagine a Fire Pokémon cooking anything with their own flames conjured a strange image.

A couple of rucksacks lay near the door, and to their right stood a round table that was oddly bereft of chairs or anything else to sit on. Nothing was painted either, but Fen realised the rustic grey colour

did a good job masking the burn marks that were present all over the floor and walls, as well as the platform. *Savi would be terrified in this place…*

Cyan invited them to sit at the table - or rather, sit on the floor next to it. Luckily the table was low enough for him and Ryu to still see over, while Cyan deliberately crouched herself opposite so as to not tower over them. It occurred to Fen that the radical height differences that could occur between different species might be a reason for the absence of chairs. The floor was comfortable enough.

"Who's this with you, Fen?" Cyan asked, gesturing to Ryu.

Ryu gave his name. "Ah, now I remember you telling me," Cyan smiled. "Well, what did you want to know?"

"I'm mainly wondering about being exposed to water," Fen said. "I know it's bad because I feel it sting whenever it rains, but… how damaging is it, exactly?"

Cyan frowned. "It's on a large spectrum. A weak water attack or a bit of rain, as you said, will hurt a little but nothing more. A sustained, full-body exposure to water will eventually kill you, though."

Fen's eyes widened in shock, which Cyan noticed, quickly adding: "Sorry! I don't mean to worry you. A full-body exposure would only happen if you fell into the sea, or something of that nature. Rain isn't as dangerous as that - you can still *breathe* in rain, unlike underwater."

Don't ever fall into any body of water, was the main message Fen gleaned from that. "Will water always be that bad?"

"Unfortunately, since fire literally burns inside of us, water exposure to our fur will always have an adverse effect. But over time, as you get more accustomed to the feeling of it - as bad as that sounds - you'll build up more of a resistance."

That makes sense, Fen thought, thinking about how painful and energy-sapping rain had felt when he'd first woken up in Cheri Forest. Since then it hadn't been quite as rough. "Uh… what if I was to fall asleep in the rain?"

After some thought, Cyan replied: "I don't think you would die, but it would hurt an awful lot, and you'd wake up very cold."

"I'd be cold?"

She nodded. "Too much water can overwhelm the radiated heat on our fur that keeps us warm. I guess you're not used to that feeling?"

Fen considered, then shook his head. *I'd never even considered it, but it's true: I haven't felt cold at all for the time I've been like this. One perk of being a Fire Pokémon, I guess.*

"Well… if you ever do feel like that, all I can say is that you'll warm up eventually. It won't be a great experience." She ruffled her fur a little. "Are you planning on sleeping outside for a while?"

Fen exchanged an uncertain look with Ryu. "Probably," he said. Suddenly getting an idea, he added, "We're travelling to Arkan."

Her eyes lit up. "Wow… why's that, if I may ask?"

"I… think it might be able to help me with what I told you about," Fen said carefully. "It's probably a long shot, but-"

"No, no, I think it's a great idea! You'll really love it there. It's a long way though, so you're right to have your concerns. Do you have a good method of creating shelter, like digging?"

Fen and Ryu exchanged looks. "I can smash rocks open," Ryu said. "But I tried digging yesterday. It didn't go well."

"Hmm. Rock smashing is good, I suppose… but I wonder if…" She paused in thought, examining Fen closely. "I'll be back in a moment." She promptly scurried off on all fours down into the basement.

Ryu looked over at Fen, smirking. "Good lying."

Fen scowled at him. "It's not wrong, in fairness. We *are* passing through the volcano…"

"Pfft, I know. I was complimenting ya," Ryu said impishly.

Fen shrugged his banter off, mulling over what Cyan had said about Arkan. He was intrigued, and a little excited, by how complimentary she had been. It was clear that something about the volcano was very *right* for Fire Pokémon. Just the thought of it was exciting his instincts.

Then he frowned, disturbed at where his thoughts were headed. *We're only going past it. Don't forget why we're travelling.*

Cyan came back shortly afterwards with what looked like a furry blanket. "Some time ago, I made the same journey as you're about to, though I started from Arkan instead. Anyway, my dad made this for me to wear when it was raining, or just chilly. I know you're not a Cyndaquil, but hopefully your body fits similarly. You might have to poke a hole for your tail or something…" she smiled at the thought. "And it may not be completely fireproof, but so much water has soaked into it over time that it must be nearing that."

She passed it to Fen, who was surprised at how… *real* the material felt. He frowned. "Is this… a Pokémon skin?"

"Yup," Cyan said, then she noticed his concern. "Is that okay? I forget what species it's from, but it would have only been a wild." She laughed nervously. "We're not savages."

He looked at the skin carefully. It did make him uneasy that this came from a 'mon that Cyan's father had presumably hunted, despite how breezily Cyan treated the issue. But it *would* keep him dry, which felt extremely important. *And… whatever 'mon this* was *has already died,* he thought. *I'm hardly doing much wrong in making use of it… am I?*

There were arm holes already cut into the skin, so he pulled it over his own, shaking himself a little to get a feel for it. He couldn't call the skin comfortable, as the sensation of its fur rubbing against his own was strange, and he sensed he would become awfully itchy the longer it was worn. But it certainly felt warm.

"Thank you, but… are you sure I can have this? Isn't it yours?" he asked Cyan.

"Hey, of course you can have it!" she said. "None of us here need it, and it's not worth anything just sitting around."

Fen understood and thanked her again. Once he had pulled the skin off, he said, "There's one other thing I wanted to talk about, kind of related. I'm… really scared of water… like of falling into it? Being near the sea terrified me."

"That's good!" She laughed. "Your instincts must be working properly. That fear is totally normal. It'll recede over time, trust me."

The answer gave a little positive nudge to Fen's self-esteem. "Anything else you want to know?" Cyan asked, when he didn't prompt her.

Fen opened his mouth to say 'no', then reconsidered. "Do you know much about humans, Cyan?"

He could sense Ryu jolt with surprise next to him, and Cyan herself looked a little bewildered by the question. "Nothing, really…" she replied uncertainly. "Only that there aren't any in Kyunn. I can't say I know much of the world beyond here, but even if I wanted to, we're a long way from any other island, and the sea is rather… impassable for you and I."

"I just heard a mentioning of them somewhere, and was curious," Fen said hurriedly, eager to quash any suspicions. He hoped he hadn't been too reckless in asking. It at least confirmed what he'd

already suspected about their geography: Kyunn was miles from anywhere.

Luckily, Cyan appeared to shrug off the question just as easily. "Will you be leaving right away?" she asked.

Fen exchanged a look with Ryu. "There's nothing else for us to do," he said. "So… yes." They had a route to follow, heaps of supplies from Scout and now something to protect himself against the rain. He could scarcely believe how well-prepared they were.

As they made a move towards the door, Cyan called out: "Fen, could you just… come over here?" Unsure why she'd ask, Fen did so anyway. She stood on all-fours now, at his eye level, then nudged her head very close to his.

"It's a difficult journey you're taking on, so please… take care of yourself," she said quietly. "I know how hard your situation must be… I'll be thinking of you all the way, alright?"

Cyan reached her fore legs out towards him, and though this felt a new situation for Fen, he intuitively knew what to do, returning the hug with his arms. As his head rested on her shoulder, he found the feeling of being held like this… amazing. Her fur felt so soft, so *warm,* the comfiest material he could imagine. He got a faint scent of ash from it, which was a bonus.

I'd wondered if there was a reason why I'd seen Pokémon huddled together so much, he thought, remembering how it was inside their room in the guild. *Maybe because it feels this nice.* The hug made him feel unexpectedly sad at having to leave Cyan for so long, despite their such brief relationship.

"I'll tell you all about it when we come back," he suggested as they left, looking to put an optimistic spin on things. *And I really hope I'm able to,* he added silently.

Cyan smiled at the thought. "I look forward to it. Fight well out there!"

The Dark

The route Faoz had drawn for them started on a reverse of the path they had travelled into Sanguin Town from. Getting up Mt. Horizon was much more tiring than getting down, however, even with their natural climbing abilities, and took them deep into the evening. Fen didn't complain when Ryu suggested camping overnight in a rock before moving into Cheri Forest tomorrow. It gave him another chance to admire the view of the grasslands below that the mountain was presumably named after. It was still as breathtaking as he remembered it six days ago, albeit slightly diminished by the dim light they were in.

Past the forest they would arrive at Ractyl's Belt, which Ryu explained was a clump of smaller mountain peaks, that a lot of mountain-dwelling Pokémon made their habitats in. Hearing him speak with obvious knowledge of the area, a thought occurred to Fen.

"Ryu, does this route take us past where your family lives?" he asked as they sat inside a rock. The ones here were comfortably more spacious than what they'd had to make do with near Hidden Wood.

Ryu seemed to tense up at the question, a half-eaten apple stopping en-route to his mouth. "Yeah… kind of."

His uncharacteristic hesitance surprised Fen. "Are you… planning to visit them?" he prompted when Ryu didn't say anything more.

Ryu looked at him for a moment. "I'll explain when we get there," he said brusquely. "We've got the whole forest to travel first, which'll be at least two days."

Explain what? Fen frowned, unsure why Ryu was so keen to brush the subject under the carpet. *I thought he'd be pleased to have the*

chance to see his family again; at least that's what I'd think if I…

The thought of family unexpectedly struck an emotional chord within him, making his chest ache with longing. *If I could see my family… if I even have one now…*

He shook his head. *No. It's too easy to think about everything I don't know. I've managed so far, and if we're going to achieve anything out here, I can't let myself get dragged down by my own thoughts. This wasn't even about me!*

Sensing something, he glanced up to find Ryu looking concernedly at him, wordlessly asking "what's up?" It wasn't the first time he'd noticed Ryu instantly pick up how he was feeling. *His instincts, or whatever it is, really are sharp,* Fen noted. *But… what do I say?*

"Sometimes I can't help but dwell on what might've happened to me," he said. "Despite me knowing that feeling bad about it won't help with anything. It's just… always in the back of my mind."

Ryu nodded. "I understand."

Though he appreciated Ryu's empathy, Fen didn't want to leave them on such a sombre note. "Uh… you know these items we have?" he asked.

"Uh-huh?" Ryu said eagerly, the question alone making him brighten up.

"Did Scout ever mention what a leppa berry did? I can't remember…"

"Oh, I've used them once or twice. They're a bit like… so for me, if I use a force palm a lot, after a while the energy I'm using for it decreases until I need either a rest or to use a different technique. It's a bit like being tired, but in a more specific way? A leppa's a bit like an oran in that it heals you, but only for that particular technique."

"So I could use it after breathing a lot of fire?"

"Yeah! You'd find it more useful than me I think, since you don't know as many different techniques. I wouldn't buy 'em normally, but y'know how Scout was giving stuff away, I wasn't gonna turn it down."

"Mm." Another idea entered his thoughts. "With the items in general… I think we should use them sparingly. We don't know how long this journey will be, and I don't want us to waste a good berry or seed too early, if that makes sense."

Ryu considered this momentarily, then shrugged. "Alright. I was doing some thinking too. D'you remember what Cheri Forest was like when we were here before? Filled with loads of Bugs and Grasses?"

Fen nodded. " *Well…* ," Ryu went on, "I thought you might appreciate some fighting practice! See, I was easy on you last time, since you barely knew how to contract your own claws-"

"Hey, I did know that!" Fen retorted.

Ryu chuckled. "Anyway, I think you should be trying to fight as much as possible, bring your skills up, y'know? While we've still got the chance. We're… not really on the same level in that regard."

"Nice way of putting it," Fen murmured jokingly. "But you're right. I don't want to have to hang onto your coattails this whole journey."

"Hang onto what?" Ryu asked, suddenly bemused.

"Oh, uh… one of our expressions. Doesn't matter. I mean that I don't want to be relying on you, or Savi, in combat like I have been. And like you say, last time there were plenty of wilds here to fight, and I have a type advantage on most of them, so it should be the perfect place to train…"

Ryu grinned. "Spoken like a true 'mon."

Since their starting point was at the forest's highest altitude, the first couple of hours that morning were a relaxed downhill cruise for their feet. The narrow, roughly carved path they walked steered mostly clear of plant life, with occasional patches of brambles or ferns that needed pushing through, but it was hardly possible to see in any other directions due to the glut of plants filling every cavity. It was little wonder the place was crawling with Pokémon.

On Fen's first trip in the forest he'd been too preoccupied with figuring out his own body, amongst many other things, to take much notice of the scenery. Now, even though he supposed he should have some appreciation for the richness of greenery, it just didn't resonate with him. It made the forest feel overly cramped and confined, giving him no desire to remain any longer than they needed to. He guessed his body didn't find it mountainous enough. Ryu must have shared his opinion, judging by the pace of his walking whenever they weren't busy with wilds.

The weather remained clear and sunny, intensely so. They were under the shadows of trees most of the time, but Fen could feel the fierce heat whenever they weren't. He was happy for it though - he never felt too hot in this body, and the sunlight seemed to resonate with his fire-powers in a way he couldn't explain. He definitely found it easier to breathe fire than in previous days.

Wild Bug and Grass Pokémon could lurch out from the long grass around them, or drop from nearby trees, or burst out of the ground itself. Fen was pleased to find that he could out-speed the opposing species on almost all occasions. His own body was naturally athletic and agile, well suited to fast movement, in contrast to the feebly slow legs the likes of Seedot or Shroomish possessed, or in the cases of Bugs like Weedle or Caterpie, no legs at all. However, though he was making progress with fire-breathing, he still felt the power of his bursts were lacking. He had seen other Fires produce torrents of flames at a moment's notice, yet his own continued to present itself in small, wisp-like pellets. He didn't know enough about himself to know what he was doing wrong, only working off the crash-course

Cyan had given him. Ryu had even less of an understanding about how Fire Pokémon worked, though he at least gave Fen some non-Fire related tips as the battles went on.

A few fallen trees still remained from the storm that had hit on their first visit. While they were an inconvenience during the day, Ryu eventually scouted one trunk propped up against a rock that was thick enough for them to sleep under, protecting against any adverse weather that they were cautious of. It was somewhat hidden under long grass, about 50 metres from their path, and they had walked half the distance when a slight rustling ahead made them freeze.

It sounded like something munching - on plants or grass, Fen assumed. Being the slightly taller of the pair, Ryu craned his neck to try and get a good look at the source, and swiftly ducked a moment later.

"It's seen us," he murmured. "A'you ready Fen?"

"Ready for-" he didn't have time to ask what, or even who the *it* in question was, as he saw a greenish, two-legged creature careering towards them, its head lowered to reveal a mushroom-like dome on top. It dove headfirst at Fen, moving quicker than he would've expected, but he threw himself to the left in time, rolling over so it was easier to jump back up.

On his opposite side he heard Ryu call out: "Breloom are fast Fen, so don't mess about!"

Like I was about to, he thought irritably. But Ryu was right in his cautioning; upon missing its target, instead of momentum taking the Breloom several feet forwards, it dug one of its clawed feet into the ground and swiftly spun to face him again.

His mind raced to strategize in such little time. *So… if Breloom are Grass, it'll probably try and hit me with another neutral attack like that headbutt? If it does then I should be able to dodge it again, since I can't see it having any arms…*

His heart duly sunk when two short, bulky limbs emerged from the Breloom's waist, previously concealed by the frills just below its neck. With the creature possessing rangier legs than his own, he barely had enough time to spit some fire as it approached. That at least made the Breloom recoil, crying a " *KAWW"* of pain. Quickly though, it shook itself and hurled an arm towards him. He ducked under the fist, but its other arm followed up and crunched into his chest, the impact knocking him into a tree a few feet away. The collision hurt less than the attack.

He gasped for a second to regain his breath, slumped against the tree trunk. *That thing can really punch… fast, too.* A small distance now stood between him and the Breloom, but his opponent didn't let up, charging towards him again. Not wanting to blind himself by diving into long grass, Fen looked up. He was pleased to see what he did. There was a branch, hanging low enough for him to reach with a jump, but high enough that the Breloom wouldn't be able to touch him with its fists.

He leaped up just as the Breloom swung again, scrambling his body around the branch. The miss meant that its fist partly collided with the tree itself, which rocked with the impact but thankfully stood strong. The Breloom's eyes darted around the floor in search of him, totally oblivious. *Heh, stupid wild,* he thought gleefully.

He scurried along the branch until he was far enough to face the Breloom's back; then he breathed in and dropped, exhaling out fire as he fell. It was a close-range hit, enough to make his foe shriek again, then whip its tail around as it realised where he was. He leapt backwards to dodge but was caught by the end of its tail, where a round fruit was growing. One such plant broke as it hit his face, leaving a thick, purple substance on him. He spat viciously as he tried to get the sludge out of his mouth. Whatever it was, it tasted vile.

He dashed to another tree in the packed area of woodland, looking to repeat the same strategy as before. The Breloom followed his trail but knew the trick this time, its gaze following Fen into the branches.

It opened its mouth and began shooting a barrage of apple-sized seeds at him, which he was helpless to avoid in his perched position. They exploded upon impact, making him yelp in further surprise.

Despite the shock, the seeds didn't hurt as much as he'd feared. He had enough energy to raise his lower body, performing a makeshift handstand on a branch to avoid one seed. Instead the seed exploded on his raised branch, which swayed briefly before snapping off its roots. He could only fall with it.

With no better ideas, he opened his mouth to breathe more embers, but could only manage it briefly before landing knocked the fire out of him. The Breloom closed in, raised its arm in attack… then Ryu burst out of the shadows. Though it stood twice his height, he slammed into the Breloom with enough force to knock it flying, akin to how the Grass's punch had battered Fen. On the ground, it looked wildly at Ryu for a second before scampering away, deciding to forage for food elsewhere.

But the Breloom was barely an afterthought to Fen. The moment he had landed, his vision spun and he became gripped with nausea. Ryu looked over cheerfully, but his face immediately became concerned as he saw Fen swaying unsteadily.

"Fen?" he asked nervously. "What's up? Are you confused?"

"No…" Fen murmured. He could still see and hear somewhat clearly, so he knew that wasn't the cause. "I feel… really ill… I don't know why…"

"Uh…" Ryu examined him from where he stood. "Maybe it's poison?"

Fen wasn't able to respond. His vision flicked for a moment, then turned black. He felt himself lose balance, topple forwards, then he surrendered consciousness entirely.

When he woke, the first thing he sensed was a spiny, thin object brushing against his cheek. Still feeling woozy, he opened his eyes and found his back propped up against a rock. It was a plant leaf being applied to his face, which Ryu carefully held in one arm. The situation seemed almost parallel to how they'd first met here.

"Oh, you're back," Ryu said, rather mutedly.

Fen winced as he ran his tongue over his parched mouth. His whole body felt limp. "I… don't like fainting," he said hoarsely.

Ryu sighed. "You've been unlucky. I didn't know those things on the Breloom's tail were some kinda toxic fruits. Pretty sneaky tactic."

Fen nodded, realising what had happened. *So this fever is what it's like to be poisoned. After paralysis and confusion, I'd make this my least favourite ailment so far…* "How long was I asleep?"

"Not long," Ryu answered. "I stuck you in the shelter here then looked around for a couple of leaves to clean off your poison with. It's nearly done, but uh…" He paused. "I'm gonna need to douse your face in water now."

"Why?" Fen asked. He suspected this experience wouldn't be pleasant.

Ryu gave him an irritated look, as if he was unaware of an obvious fact. But he quickly caught himself. "Poison affects you even when it's just on the skin," he explained. "You recover naturally from it, but it'll be quicker this way."

Once Fen gave him the go-ahead, Ryu took his water flask, screwed off the top, then poured a small amount onto the site of the poisoning. The poison's water exposure and the water itself both stung Fen, but he tried not to recoil as Ryu quickly took another clean leaf, scrubbed his cheek a bit, then turned the leaf over and wiped off the excess water with its dry side.

He passed Fen a firm, bright green berry. "This'll make you feel better, too."

Fen thanked him and took a bite without hesitation. He found the unknown fruit remarkably dull and tasteless, though that might've just been the poison dulling his senses. Once he'd taken a couple of chunks out of it, he sat back and allowed whatever healing processes were happening in his body to take over. He was sitting against a rock that the thick trunk of their tree shelter had fallen against, casting a shadow over them. Hardly perfect, but it was better than sleeping in a rock.

After only a few minutes, his grogginess began to subside as he started to feel more like his energetic, Pokémon-self. The speed of healing still surprised him, despite Pokémon constantly subverting his recovery expectations. "That berry works wonders," he remarked to Ryu. He glanced at the two-thirds-eaten fruit beside him. "What kind of…"

Ryu looked quizzically at him as he trailed off. "Hm?"

"Is this… did you give me a lum berry?"

"Yeah?" Ryu shrugged. "Why'd you sound so surprised? That's the one that heals ailments, 'mon."

"But… they're valuable! Remember what I said yesterday about conserving items? We're only a day in and now there's only one of these left."

Ryu puffed out his cheeks. "Sorry that I didn't want to leave a poisoned, unconscious 'mon out in the middle of the forest on his own for an indeterminate amount of time, while I search for pecha berries that might not even be growing within a square Wailord of here. Mew, I'm try'na help you…"

Fen groaned inwardly at the response, equally as frustrated as Ryu. It seemed their disagreements would never cease, no matter how

long they travelled together. "Look, I'm really thankful for your help. It's just that I'm worried about the size of the task ahead, and the more items we use the harder it'll be."

Ryu huffed. "You know what? If it makes you feel better, I can look for some pecha berries now before it gets dark. We need food anyway."

"Thank you," Fen said, ignoring the sarcasm in Ryu's response. He didn't feel like arguing. "Any way I can help in the meantime?"

"Fill up our water," Ryu said without hesitation. He tossed their almost dry flask over to him, then gestured left with his arm. "I'm sure the river's this way through the long grass. There aren't so many trees growing around the stream, so it'd be easier if we split up for a bit."

He was about to turn away, then paused. He spoke softer. "Fen… you know that you don't *always* have to fight, yeah? I wouldn't ever want to run away from a battle, but if you wanted to conserve items… it's an option."

Fen remembered employing a 'get away from here' tactic just two days ago, when he and Savi fled from the Zubat colony. He knew that with his body, he certainly *could* run. But it wasn't a strategy he was keen to perfect; he worried that there would be occasions in the future where their only option *was* to fight. Still, he appreciated the advice from Ryu. "I'll keep it in mind," he said. Ryu simply nodded and started walking away.

He seems a bit subdued, Fen observed. *Could just be tiredness. He does carry the bag around all day, which must weigh a ton with a dozen berries and seeds, food and water, the map, compass, and my rainproof coat. He's never complained though… I guess he likes wearing it?*

His path to the river went undisturbed, breaking out into a small clearing as he got closer. He examined Ryu's flask properly for the

first time. Despite its basic purpose, it had clearly been crafted with care; the cylindrical shape had no irregularities, and little bumps in the top and lid allowed the latter to be screwed on with total precision. It wasn't made of plastic or metal, nor any other material Fen would have expected. The hardness and density of the dull, grey material suggested it had to be rock. *Which makes sense if Ryu's family live in the mountains.* He smiled to himself. *Looks like they have plenty of time on their hands* .

He found himself gazing at his own reflection in the water, still quite unused to how he looked; either the Pokémon on Kyunn didn't know how to craft mirrors, or he hadn't happened to pass any. There were still features of his appearance that irked him - the ridiculous proportions of his head and ears to the rest of his body; his strange orange head fluff that was impossible to control; plus the general sense of impunity he felt at being, by his rough estimation, about two feet tall.

And yet, these drawbacks could be overlooked. He was small, yes, but the extremely low centre of gravity gave him greater agility and balance than any human he could imagine. He had quickly gotten used to his new body proportions, too. And he wasn't taking for granted the fact that he possessed two sets of limbs and five fingers on each hand - though sadly only three toes. When he thought about some of the species' that he could have been turned into instead of a Chimchar: Bugs that had to slither across the ground, Waters that could only survive beneath the surface, or anything that didn't walk like he was used to doing… he almost wanted to count himself lucky. *It could have been far worse.*

Once the flask was refilled and secured, he moved his legs to stand up, but his right was suddenly jerked back, making the flask drop from his hands. He whipped his head around then yelped as he found the source of the grip, almost falling backwards in shock.

A four-legged Pokémon, with primarily slate-grey coloured fur and intense turquoise eyes, was standing in front of him. He'd only seen her once before, but the image was burned into his mind. The one

who'd ambushed him in Sanguin Town, disguising herself as Savi. The one who'd asked him how he knew about humans. *What was she doing here?!*

"Hello again, Fire," she said, smiling wickedly.

Fen was already baffled at how she had found him in the depths of a random forest, yet her opening words disturbed him even more. She seemed more assured than when she'd attacked him in the town.

"That's… not how you greeted me the first time," he said nervously, his body awkwardly half-turned in her direction while his leg was held.

She shrugged. "I deduced after our last encounter that you're far weaker than me, so I didn't see the point in pinning you down like that again. Though seeing where we are now, I'd call this an equivalent situation, wouldn't you?"

A fresh injection of panic shot through Fen as he realised what she meant. He was pinned against the bank of a river deeper than himself. He assumed her grip to be too strong for him to pull away from, but if he did try attacking this Pokémon, or even attempt fleeing, it would only take a push from her to send him underwater. Remembering what Cyan had said about the damage full-body exposure to water could do, added to his own experiences of the element… it terrified him. He didn't have Ryu's protection, nor any of the items they carried, and a call for help could well meet him with the same fate as those previous options.

"H-how did you find me?" he asked.

"I've been following you and your Fighter partner since I saw you leaving that town yesterday," she said easily.

Fen's head was bursting with questions. "I don't… why didn't we notice you then?! And how could you even track us in Sanguin

Town? Taluk was looking for you after you were caught attacking me last time!"

She rolled her eyes. "Easy. I created an illusion to disguise myself. That's why the Electric never caught me in the first place."

Fen stared at her wide-eyed. "That's… what you did that time before, when you looked like Savi…? You disguised yourself as a different Pokémon? I've never heard of anything like that…"

"It's irrelevant detail," she snapped, suddenly impatient. "I followed you because I still have unanswered questions. You said you don't have any memories, but you know what humans are, which isn't normal of the 'mon around here. No humans live here, do they?"

Fen was momentarily thrown by the question. "No…?"

"So how do you know them?"

This question he dreaded. Given what this Pokémon already knew about him, he couldn't see any alternative but to reveal the rest of his identity. He had no idea how she'd respond, but hopefully telling her would lead her to reveal who *she* was, or at the very least make her stop threatening him. He still harboured hopes that she might be able to help him somehow… though another part of him told him to stop being so naive.

"Once I tell you… you answer the same question for me," he proposed.

The Pokémon's scowl deepened. "I'll decide that once I hear your answer."

He couldn't argue in his position. "Look… you have to believe what I tell you is true," he pleaded. "No matter how hard it might be to believe."

She looked at him oddly. "Fine. Just say your piece, Fire."

Fen gulped. "You're right - I did wake up some time ago, with practically no memories of my previous life, other than my name. Despite that, I still know concepts of things that I'd presumably learned before. One of those things, one of the only things I can be sure about myself, is that, before I was *this*," he gestured to his body, "I was a human. Somehow… I've been turned into a Chimchar."

She stared at him for a few moments, eyes quivering in disbelief. Her grip on his leg tightened, making him wince. "That's impossible!" she spat.

" *I know* !" Fen said, increasingly anxious. His neck ached with the strain of being turned for so long. "I really wish I knew how, and I ask myself that question every day! But I'm here now, and I have no doubt that I was a human. That's all I can tell you."

She considered this, then suddenly lurched her body forwards at Fen, putting her snout right against his face, making him feel the heat of her breathing. He was still held down, and hardly in a position to back away in the first place. "If you're so sure, then I suppose you're just as big a scum as the rest of those two-legged mutts, huh?"

"What?" he yelped. "What do you-"

"You wanted to know why I'm interested in you?" she asked, fangs bared at him. "Well, let me tell you… when I was a child I was captured, beaten, taken from my home, my family… I lost everything dear to me. Can you guess who was responsible?"

Just then, Fen saw a movement in the corner of his vision. It was only faint at first, but it grew bigger by the millisecond. He recognised the figure immediately.

He'd never heard Ryu voice his own cry before. Such was his calmness and efficiency in battle situations, Fen supposed he'd never needed to use it, or merely chose not to. No semblance of calm emanated from him now, as he howled at the grey Pokémon in

furious barks. His paws were already raised, eyes blazing with anger as he sprinted towards them.

The grey Pokémon's ears twitched in response, but she didn't shift an inch, remaining intensely focused on Fen. "Can you *guess* ?" she asked again, words dripping with malice.

"Please…" Fen gasped at her, heart pounding. "I'm on your side… I'm not-"

She spat at his feet. "It was you human *bastards!* "

She shoved him with the paw holding his leg, and while he scrambled to regain his balance, she loosed a cry as she swung her head into his ribs. The impact threw Fen off his feet, breath knocked out as he fell helplessly towards the water. There was a brief moment when his mind realised what it was faced with, bringing an involuntary scream out of him. Then he hit the surface.

Freezing liquid crashed over his mouth, instantly soaking his fur. The shock of so much exposure at once overwhelmed him. The stabbing pain he'd known from rainwater was magnified a thousand times. His flaming tail especially burned with agony like never before, feeling as if it would shatter into a million fragments. Any conscious thought was masked by pain. He thrashed around, barely in control of himself, just looking for *something* that would save him. With the water restricting his movement and rapidly draining his energy, that hope was fast fading.

The next moments happened in a blur. First there were a couple of muffled splashes nearby. Then a pair of arms took hold of his waist firmly, ignoring his continued flailing. The figure swiftly pulled him through the water, and he felt his side bump against a hard surface. The figure holding him pulled itself up to the bank first, and with an almighty grunt that Fen could make out even in his pain, he too was lifted onto the grass.

The first thing he did was gasp for air, spewing out liquid from his mouth. Simply breathing something other than water was a relief. Then shook his head with all the energy he could muster, attempting to dry himself.

The sudden return to land was almost as much of a shock as the water. For the first time Fen could remember, he truly felt *cold.* He was shivering uncontrollably, continually clenching-then-unclenching his fingers and toes to try and force out the chilling numbness that had taken over them. The sensations felt so alien, so *wrong* that they frightened him. He hesitantly reached out with a hand to feel his tail flame. It was lit, only weakly, but knowing that comforted him a little.

Once his lungs were fully functional, he began to pick up the rest of his senses, and he realised he was lying flat on his stomach. Hearing noises from nearby, he lifted his head up… then almost stopped breathing again.

Ryu and the grey Pokémon, both dripping with river water, were fighting each other.

Ryu had been mere moments too late.

He had returned to the shelter where he and Fen had split up, finding himself alone. His quest for food had eventually been successful, but it had taken more effort than he'd expected, especially in finding pecha berries.

Since Fen's task seemed unavoidably simple by comparison, Ryu didn't wait long for him before jogging over towards the river. Once he started hearing Fen's faint voice ahead, that jog broke into a run, and when he finally saw him, pinned against the bank, it became a mad sprint.

On reflection, he was surprised that merely the sight of Fen being threatened by the Dark 'mon produced such a strong reaction in him, but at that moment Ryu's only thought was to protect him. Then

when the Dark had kicked Fen off the edge of the bank… he just wanted to hurt her.

She turned her head and shifted herself as if about to dodge his incoming tackle, but then Ryu did something new. In mid-sprint, he took a shorter step with his leading foot, using it as a springboard to throw his body forwards. The burst of pace was what he did when using quick attacks, but he'd never practiced it at such high speed. It was faster than he'd ever moved before, too fast for the Dark to react to. He crashed full-bodied into her, the force sending them both flying into the river with Fen.

That turned out to be a good thing. Ryu thought himself a competent swimmer, having swam many times before, but he'd never had to use that skill to pull out a sinking Fire 'mon. The Chimchar's flailing limbs were impossible to miss, and the river was confined enough to only require a few quick strokes to reach him, then some slightly more awkward ones to drag him back to the bank. Even for a Fighter like him, hauling Fen out had Ryu reach deep into his reserves of strength.

It was to his relief that Fen was breathing - though it was more like *gasping* - and that he looked unhurt. With him safe, Ryu's attention turned back to the Dark. She too had dragged herself from the river, standing about 10 feet from him now, her scruffy fur dripping with residue. She shook herself furiously, eyes trained on Ryu the whole time. In the dim light of the evening, her greyness camouflaged her well.

Ryu was still seething for how brutal she had been to Fen. "Who the fuck are you?" he screamed at her. "What's your problem with Fen? Do you want to drown him?!"

The Dark scowled back at him. "You don't know who he is," she replied.

Ryu barely considered what the cryptic message might mean. "I know that he's my friend," he said defiantly. She gave a little smirk at

that, which angered him even more. "And I know that you'd better explain yourself, you fuckin' feral!"

The Dark had looked composed up to now, but upon hearing his insult she leant forwards and growled angrily, bearing her fangs. She moved towards him until the two of them were within arms-length, then with a flex of her paw extended her claws, gaining a shadowy aura on the tips of them.

She suddenly lashed out with one, but it was designed to fall just in front of Ryu, missing his face. Reading her feint, he ducked under her the follow-up scratch before slamming his palm into the black knot of fur just below her head. She let out a squeal of surprise as she rolled over.

She thought I would flinch at her swipe! Ryu thought smugly. *Stupid Dark should've known that that's the one thing our species* can't *do.*

Now that the Dark was weakened, he was eager to finish her off. As she scrambled back up, he dashed forwards and threw a right hook, only to almost fall over when his arm overextended across his body. No impact was made, only a wisp of greyness where his target should have been.

I… what? I missed? Where… Darting his eyes around, he saw her standing just a step backwards from him, unharmed. He was bewildered as to how she'd moved so quickly, but put it down to mere good luck, or a slight mistake of aim on his part. He stepped forwards and tried again with his left fist, then kicked upwards with his opposite leg. Neither attack inflicted a scratch, and again the Dark appeared a step backwards. Even more confusingly, she hadn't made any offensive move of her own since the first attack. She was stony faced, her emotions impossible to read.

Ryu exhaled irritably. *Why's she so timid all of a sudden? Is she really too scared to attack again? Fine, if that's how you're gonna be… you can't avoid me forever!*

To try and catch her off-guard he sprung off his standing leg to hit her with a quick attack, though she still managed to escape with only a glancing blow. Once behind her he threw conservatism out of the window, punching and kicking as fast as his body would allow. There was only a grey blur in his vision, the Dark continuing to swerve his attacks at a prodigious speed. One leg eventually made a solid whack on her side, which drew another squeal before she jumped backwards. Her lack of a response yet again made Ryu's frustration grow.

The Dark shuffled back until a few feet separated them. Then, she started walking in a circle around him, taking very precise, practiced sidesteps. Ryu was confused at what this plan was, but he was glad to be given a momentary breather, feeling the strain that his own intensity of attacking had caused him. As she continued her strange walk, he grew impatient and readied himself to strike again, to irrevocably end whatever strange resistance this was. Yet once he tried to focus on her, something strange happened to his vision.

His image of the Dark seemed to be blurring, as if there were multiple copies of her moving at once, each very close to one another. He blinked and shook his head, bemused, but the effect only got worse the longer he tried to locate the real Dark. Quickly there became an army of identical, grey-red 'mon circling him, within which the Dark could be hidden anywhere.

What trickery is this? he thought, starting to panic. He continuously scanned his vision around the circle, looking for any clues that would give the Dark away, but it was a fruitless search, every copy moving as one. Eventually he heard a snarl from behind him. The illusory circle vanished as he whirled his head around to the direction of sound, but his own reactions were a split-second behind what he expected. He gasped in shock at being too slow. The Dark slashed him viciously in the neck with both paws.

He backwards rolled over with the impact before jumping back up, but staggered, wincing in pain as he felt his neck burn. The hesitation gave the Dark an opportunity to swipe at him again,

striking him in the same place. He fell helplessly to the floor. The Dark lurched forwards, biting down onto his right ankle, then immediately yanked her head upwards with it still in her jaws.

The movement sent shockwaves through Ryu's right side, and he screeched a desperate, wordless cry for help. His eyes welled up with pain. He tried to kick at the Dark with his free leg, but couldn't summon the energy. He knew he had lost.

It was his opponent's intention behind her attacks that scared him the most. If his legs weren't so muscular and strong-boned, by virtue of him being a Fighter, he was certain her bite would have snapped his ankle. She'd struck him in the neck because it was his body's least protected area, other than maybe his eyes, but they were hard to reach. And an ankle was easier to break than a leg. Her attacks had been carefully calculated to cause the most harm. This was no typical wild.

"Stop! Please!" he choked through tears, as she held onto him. "You win, 'mon! I surrender!"

She dropped his ankle, but kept a paw on his chest as he spat out the blood she'd produced. Before she could do anything more, Ryu saw a sudden flash of white, then a *crack* as an object broke against her body. The Dark fell backwards from him like a stone.

Ryu looked left to the source. There, damp, shivering, looking on the verge of collapsing, was Fen. He gingerly held their seed pouch in one hand. *Which must mean…*

He had broken the stun seed on her.

Torment

Fen had only thrown the seed about 10 paces from the two fallen Pokémon, but that was as far as he could manage. He staggered over to them before dropping onto all fours.

He felt like someone had taken his body and violently wrung it out until there was nothing left but a lifeless pile of fur and bones. And all because he'd fallen into a river. It had become painfully clear that as robust as he usually was, and as fast as he could recover from injuries, when it came to water he was as fragile as glass. *I'll be more careful next time,* was what he wanted to tell himself. Really though, the grey Pokémon had sensed and exploited his weakness before he could do anything about it.

The grey 'mon was still paralysed from the seed hit. Despite knowing the seed's purpose, seeing it in action so brutally had stunned Fen a little, too. Fen hadn't watched much of her and Ryu's fight, but he had seen what mattered. Ryu was breathing shallowly now, his tail swaying very slightly, but his eyes were closed.

All Fen had in his hand was the seed pouch; he had left the rest of their bag on the bank, where Ryu had flung it off just before pulling him from the river. Fen couldn't take his attention off the grey 'mon, so any oran berries would have to wait for now. He cursed his stupidity; he needed one as much as Ryu did.

Abrupt stabs of motion began returning to the grey Pokémon's body, first in her head, then her limbs and tail. Fen knew he needed to speak and tried to keep his voice steady, which was made more difficult by his constant shivering.

"We have more seeds like that one," he said slowly. "If you try hurting either of us again, I'll use them." He hoped the grey 'mon would take his words seriously given his obvious exhaustion. He couldn't have looked much less intimidating.

It turned out not to be an issue. Once she had regained movement, the grey 'mon stood in a defensive pose, paws close to her body. Like him, she shivered slightly and her eyes, previously so intense and full of anger, were wide and fearful. Her transformation was startling, and Fen had no idea how to respond. Luckily, she answered for him.

"I won't hurt you again," she agreed, almost stuttering. "But that thing you threw… how could you have known…"

"Known what…?" Fen asked hesitantly. Inside, he was bursting with relief at her first statement; he still felt terrified of her. "It's… just a stun seed."

The Pokémon considered his answer for a while. She shook herself, and when she was still again most of the fire in her expression had returned. "Forget it. You're… just a lost, memory-bare human. What do you want with me?"

Fen was stunned for a moment, but just managed to conceal his surprise. She was wary enough of their seeds to do whatever he would ask of her. He couldn't lose this chance! "I just want to know who you are. How you ended up here. Could you tell us that?"

The Pokémon scowled. "What good is a story like that to you?"

"It might help me," Fen said. "Might help us both. But I won't know until you say."

She looked at Fen then with such a burning hatred that, were it not for his bag of seeds, he knew she would happily toss him in the river again.

"Does the name Zorua mean anything to you?" she said eventually.

It had a trace of familiarity to Fen, but he couldn't recall any concrete facts about the name. He shook his head.

"Well, that's what I am. Our species line can create illusions, obviously. No-one here seems aware that we exist."

"So… you weren't born in Kyunn?" Fen asked. "Where *are* you from? A place where humans lived?"

She gave him another withering look. It *was* a stupid question, Fen reflected. He quickly tried another tack. "How did you… get captured by them?"

"One day I was out exploring, as I always did," the Zorua said. "Then suddenly a bunch of humans turned up, surrounded me and… somehow put me to sleep."

Fen frowned. "Where did they take you?"

She thought for a second. "This horribly bright room. Humans were everywhere, and dozens of weird devices. I tried to escape at first, I was desperate. But they had ways to stop me. They would grab hold of me and press this *thing* on my chest-" She paused, eyes darting briefly to the seed pouch. "I was there for a while."

Fen suddenly felt hugely sorry for the Zorua. She had lost everyone she knew and been thrust into a totally alien environment… almost like what had happened to him. But no, what she'd described was *far* worse, and those experiences clearly still haunted her. To find a way out of that situation, as he assumed she must have done, meant she had an incredible will.

But, on the other hand… she'd pushed *him,* a Fire Pokémon, into a river! If Ryu hadn't been there to rescue him… Fen didn't want to think about how he might've ended up. How the Zorua then attacked Ryu was just as bad. Whatever might have happened to her, he couldn't justify those actions.

"Do you know why you were captured?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered. "Those *scum* were trying to study my abilities. I'm not sure how they knew about my illusions, but while I never fully understood their language, I knew that was what they wanted me to do. I never obliged, though."

It would make sense for humans to want to research a rare species. But what she was describing… it made Fen queasy to consider. Were other rare Pokémon species treated so brutally in this place? And why hadn't she been released when it became clear that she wasn't going to cooperate? Fen wondered how he would have responded in the Zorua's position; he couldn't see himself taking such a determined stance. *I don't even want to imagine that scenario, though…*

"I assume you found a way to escape?" Fen asked. The Zorua grunted an agreement.

"So… how?"

"It was pretty simple," the Zorua said. "I disguised myself as one of the humans. That lasted up until I had to smash through this glass wall to the exit. After that, I had no idea where they'd taken me, where my old home was; all I did was run as far as possible."

"But you're *here*, now*,* " Fen said, frowning. "How? There aren't any humans in Kyunn."

"No," she agreed. "I managed to steal a ride off a Flyer to get across the sea." When Fen looked promptingly at her, she snapped, "Does *this detail* really matter to you?"

"It might," Fen replied firmly.

She grunted, then paused for what felt like minutes, surely just to irritate him, before explaining. "There was a Pidgeot. It was gathering its young to migrate for the winter. One of the Pidgey injured its wing, so instead of flying with the rest of them, its mother was going to carry it. I incapacitated the Pidgey when no one was

watching, then took on its appearance and took its place. Then, when I saw this island in sight, I gave the mother a little bite to make it descend. But then the other Pidgey realised something was up, so… I had to swim the last stretch to get here." She raised an eyebrow. "Happy?"

Although the answer didn't help himself at all, Fen was lost for words. This Zorua was extraordinary. She had no thresholds for when it came to getting what she wanted. Terrifying, but… *determined.* That was the word he kept coming back to.

He wanted conformation of one more thing. "So, the reason you attacked me in the first place was because you thought I was looking for you?"

Another grunt. "It's a long way from my old region, and I know none of your scum live here, but I heard you mention them and thought they might have somehow found a way to capture me - even through a 'mon. Turns out I was wrong. But believe me, *human,* " she hissed at him, suddenly aggressive, *"* I don't care who you are - I'm not sorry for anything I did. Thanks to your kind, I'll never see my home, my *parents,* ever again. You destroyed my life forever. And you're just as bad as any of them."

"But I'm not like them!" Fen said defiantly, hurt. "I would never harm another Pokémon like that! Never!"

She ignored his answer, starting to walk away. "I've told you everything you wanted. If I ever-"

"Wait!" Fen exclaimed again, suddenly getting an idea. "One more question… do you know the name of the place you came from?"

The Zorua looked resentfully at him, but she didn't move any further. "Only the human one," she said. "I can't say it properly."

"Say it how you *can.* "

She paused, seemed to shake her head in disgust at him, but then screwed her face up and made a strangled, two-syllabled noise. It sounded a bit like " *Hoy-en"* to Fen, though was nothing like anything he'd heard a Pokémon say.

Still, the word sparked something inside of him. *"Hoy-en…"* A human word, the name of a region. It did seem familiar, somehow… almost like…

"Hoenn," he said out loud. *Hoenn. Hoenn! That's… that's where I lived before, I know it! Hoenn… that means that me and the Zorua-*

He looked up to speak to her, but she wasn't in front of him. He looked around frantically, then cried her name. Nothing. She had vanished.

What he *did* see was Ryu's body, still unmoved and still barely conscious. He'd completely forgotten the Riolu. Fen dragged himself over to their bag as fast as he could, fished out an oran berry and slashed a third off it by extending one of his claws.

He nudged Ryu's arm, who lifted his head weakly. Despite Ryu's state, a look of intense craving entered his eyes the moment he saw the berry, and Fen couldn't hand the larger piece over fast enough. Ryu devoured it in seconds, then moaned in what sounded like relief. He silently raised at paw at Fen, who gladly took it as an 'ok' signal, or a thumbs up without thumbs.

His piece of the berry did not quite fill him with energy again, but it warmed his insides, and his coldness mercifully began to fade.

Still, too much had happened for him to relax. *Hoenn.* It was like when he'd remembered his name. He knew he came from Hoenn, but the word alone didn't trigger anything *else* ; no landmarks, town names, personal memories… nothing. He wouldn't even know where to find the region in relation to Kyunn. He also knew from experience that trying to get anything more from his memory would be futile, and resisted the urge to scream in frustration.

Then he thought more about the Hoenn-like word the Zorua had said. Why had she been unable to?

Fen tried to hear the word 'Hoenn' in his head, as a human would pronounce it. He felt like he could manage that. With that sound in mind, he opened his mouth and tried to recreate it… but all that came out was a similar strangled noise to the Zorua's.

Rather unsettled, he then said "Hoenn" out loud like how he had the first time, without paying attention to how it sounded. It was easy, and sounded right to him. But it wasn't the same word.

Suddenly, the answer hit him. *Of course; when Pokémon speak to each other, it's in growls and grunts and things. They just* can't *make the sounds that the human language does. So, everything I've heard other Pokémon say, and everything I've said, is in their kind of language! I guess my brain can translate my human thoughts into this Pokémon speak…*

His heart sunk as he realised something else. *But then… I'm just like any other Pokémon. I can't speak to humans. If I was to meet one now, even if I could understand them, I'd just appear to be an ordinary Pokémon…*

No more positive was the fact that the Zorua seemed the only 'mon he'd met - and may ever meet from this island - who might be able to help him recovery his memories. Not only did she hate him, she had disappeared - and with her abilities, finding her again seemed an impossible task. If that plan was a no-go, the only other option was to continue what him and Ryu had been doing; looking for an Absol. In terms of recovering his memories it didn't offer much hope by comparison, but it was better than nothing.

Fen realised the sun had already faded. He looked over at Ryu and saw him sitting up, head facing the ground so his expression was hidden. Noticing a movement, his head flicked up at Fen for a split second before withdrawing again.

"Ryu, are yo-"

"I'm fine, 'mon," Ryu interrupted, still looking down. "I know you wanna get to the shelter. Let's go." He made no comment about the odd sounds Fen had just been making, nor the Zorua at all.

Maybe he was just in a questioning mood, but Fen found himself pondering Ryu's words again as they walked. It was strangely perceptive of Ryu to know that his second thought, beyond asking if he was okay, was that he wanted to get back under the cover of their tree. And this wasn't the first time Ryu miraculously seemed to sense his feelings or thoughts. Granted, some occasions Fen could understand. When he lied to Taluk about the Zorua for instance, since he hated lying and knew he was bad at it. But just now, Ryu had glanced at him for a split second… and yet knew perfectly what was on his mind. Wasn't that a little *too* good?

It also occurred to him that Ryu hadn't pulled this trick, if that's what he could call it, on anyone else they'd met so far. Not even slightly. That puzzled him even more.

"Ryu?" Fen said, as they started a slow walk back into the trees. The Riolu led the way in front, apparently able to see in the dark. He grunted in response.

Fen opened his mouth to speak, but couldn't think of a good way to ask the question, 'have you been reading my mind?' Given Ryu's mood, he worried how the Riolu might respond, regardless of how correct his suspicions were. So the question hung in the air, until Ryu glanced over his shoulder expectantly.

"… It's nothing," Fen muttered eventually. He would bring it up another time.

Neither of them slept well that night. In Fen's case it wasn't due to mulling over his memories, but that his mind seemed intent on replaying the moments he was tossed into the river, over and over.

He could only try and console himself with what Cyan had told him about water; the more exposure he had, the greater a resistance he could build up.

I've had some exposure, all right, he thought.

Ryu woke up with his eyes an even brighter shade of red than usual. He complained that it had been too hot to sleep, and a faint ring of shedded blue fur around where he'd been lying seemed to prove it. Fen thought the temperature was fine but, as Ryu pointed out, that was what any Fire would think.

Aside from that and the occasional comments on their fights, Ryu hardly said a word for the rest of their forest trawl. Not that it affected much; he kept up as fast a walking pace as ever, despite Fen seeing his face and paws getting increasingly damp with sweat as the heat continued.

From the afternoon the forest's vegetation gradually started thinning out, and finally ended at the bottom of a moss-covered hill. When they scaled this, the sudden view of Ractyl's Belt took Fen by surprise.

The mountain range was huge, with peaks in the distance stretching far beyond what he could make out from their viewpoint. Some mountains were low enough to still be decorated with plant-life, while higher, sharper peaks further away bore only a bleak greyness. Though it looked an intimidating place to climb, the prospect of taking it on excited Fen.

He could make out miniscule Pokémon figures all over the mountains, and he blinked when a couple of white 'mon appeared to disappear inside a large rock. Ryu duly explained that many species made their homes inside such spaces for warmth and safety, including his own family. When Fen asked how Pokémon could get food from such a high altitude, Ryu sighed and reminded him that Rock and Steel 'mon could live entirely off the rocks and iron present on the mountains.

The contrast between this place and Sanguin Town could hardly be greater, he thought. *Although, a wild mountain range is more what I'd expect from a solely Pokémon island.*

Their first challenge was to navigate a lake that stretched as wide as the mountain range itself and measured at least 20 metres in length. This too should've looked beautiful, with the evening sun creating an orange tint on the water's surface, but Fen didn't feel very appreciative of its existence.

Ryu assured him that many Fires had been through Ractyl's Belt before, and there was an easily accessible crossing over the lake. That only convinced Fen until he was close enough to see what Ryu meant; a set of unevenly square rocks, designed to be stepping stones, floating in a rough line across the water.

He was even less confident upon seeing a couple of blue Water Pokémon burst out of the water to their left, snapping and spewing water at each other before crashing back under.

Fen looked wide-eyed at Ryu. "Please tell me that's not going to happen to us?"

Ryu shrugged it off. "They're probably just fighting for the same prey. They won't attack us if we stay out of their territory. Just don't fall in the water and you'll be fine."

Fen sighed. *How reassuring.* "Alright. Let's get this over with."

He stepped onto the first stone, which didn't move under his weight. *That's good… just keep moving, and don't think about the water below…* The next stone was too far for his legs to reach so he jumped towards it, very careful not to underestimate his trajectory like he had done before. The jump seemed to almost take him further in height than in distance, but he landed without a problem, pleased that his toes instinctively clawed into the rock for grip. The rest of the stones were of a similar distance, which he quickly got used to.

But as he prepared to jump the third-last stone, a sudden gust of wind caught him in the air, knocking his tiny body off balance. He squealed in panic as his left foot landed heavily on the edge of the stone, then buckled under his body weight. Falling on his stomach, both his legs crashed into the water before he could rebalance himself. Ryu arrived behind him a moment later, hitting the stone with virtually no impact at all, and helped him back to his feet.

The stinging pain of water frustrated Fen more than anything, an emotion he was becoming familiar with. He wished he didn't have to rely on Ryu so much.

"Two more stones, 'mon," Ryu had to shout above the howling wind that had picked up. The flat lake left them completely exposed to it. "I'll jump straight after you."

Fen gave him a thumbs up in response, not seeing the value in opening his mouth. At first Ryu looked back at him in bewilderment, but he seemed to get the message.

He slanted his next jump slightly rightwards to account for the gale and landed stably enough, though Ryu still helped balance him. The final leap took them back to solid ground, but Ryu had already started running ahead before Fen could relax. Ryu mouthed 'shelter' and gestured wildly for him to follow.

In the five minutes it took to find a smashable rock, a thrashing rain started falling and even a murmuring of thunder crackled in the distance. They threw themselves under the cover, neither holding any restraint in shaking themselves dry. Hearing the rain clatter their hollow rock was even more deafening than being outside, so they didn't bother speaking. It was getting dark anyway; all they could do was try and sleep.

As Fen was drifting out of consciousness, he felt the emotions again.

Fear and panic assaulted his mind, making him instinctively flee from their rock, only to yelp and scramble back when he was pummelled by rain and wind. The storm outside was still raging.

He got as far back into the rock as he could and shook himself. For the second day in a row he felt an unfamiliar coldness settling on him.

He realised then, seeing through the small light of his tail flame that Ryu was staring wide eyed at him. Though Fen wasn't sure if it needed explanation, he simply said "It happened again," as loud as he could. Ryu nodded without a word.

Like in the previous attacks, Fen's head was pounding, and it hurt even more when he tried to curl up and keep still, the opposite of how his body wanted to respond. He screwed his eyes shut. *If anyone's listening to me,* he thought desperately, *if these attacks are supposed to be some kind of message, then… I get it, okay?! Something bad, something fearful is happening… just please, Arceus, make these things stop! I don't know if I can take much more…*

Feeling an unexpected heat against his side, he opened his eyes and blinked. Ryu had come to lie next to him, wrapping an arm around his back. Ryu's body warmth spread to him quickly, bringing a wave of calm over his body. He felt better almost immediately. Even his headache started receding.

He wanted to say thanks, but Ryu had already closed his eyes, and Fen got the sense that he wouldn't be opening them until morning. So, in the only other way he could show gratitude, Fen followed his behaviour and tried, once again, to get some sleep. This time it was successful.

It was to Fen's relief that the morning greeted him with quietness. He'd hoped for the storm to end quickly, since the first two they'd known had behaved as such.

When he stepped out of the shelter though, it wasn't what he expected. For a start, the grass was absolutely soaked, pools of water gathering in some areas. The sky wasn't clear and sunny like it usually had been post-storms, but grey with clouds. A dense fog of the same hue hung in the air.

To escape the wet he jumped on top of their rock, which was less damp, and found Ryu already there, eating a berry.

"Looks like the storm lasted most of the night," Fen observed.

"Looks like it," Ryu muttered, gazing absently into the distance.

"The previous ones seemed to clear much faster. I wonder if there's any reason why?"

Ryu only grunted in response, as he had done to a number of Fen's recent dialogues. Even if the question was rather unanswerable, his continual miserableness was worrying. Ryu was normally so enthusiastic about their adventuring… what could have changed? Fen expected that being defeated by the Zorua like Ryu had been would have hurt him, but that had been over a day ago. And those events had barely been brought up since.

Ryu had their map rolled up next to him. Fen took a look at it, using the clear drawings of cheri berries in the nearby forest as a reference for where they were now.

"So, the path Faoz drew takes us through this mountain range, coming out at a path leading to Arkan," he said. "Is the compass still in the bag? Then we could see what direction we need to head, and…"

He trailed off as Ryu didn't seem to be listening, still gazing ahead. His paws were shaking slightly. Fen tried a different approach.

"Look, Ryu, I can see something's bothering you. I… I don't want a cloud hanging over us all day, so if there's something I've been doing

wrong, or anything I can do to help you, then-"

"It's nothing to do with you," Ryu interrupted. "This is my fault."

He finally turned his head around, and Fen saw his face looking even more sleep deprived than yesterday. "I've been keeping things from you, Fen. I've lied to you about a lot of stuff. About why I was out here in the first place."

Fen stared at him in disbelief. "You've lied?"

"You couldn't have known," Ryu went on, voice quavering, "because I lied to myself too… convincing myself that what I'd done could be justified, even though it that was impossible…"

He suddenly lashed out in anger with one of his feet, hitting their rock with a *crunch.* Thin pieces of debris flew off, but the kick seemed to harm Ryu more, judging by his wincing.

"Can you… explain what it is?" Fen asked hesitantly. He didn't know what else to say.

"I have to, now," Ryu said miserably. He had a moment's rest, took a few gulps of water, then spoke again. "Do you remember at Mt. Horizon, I told you about why I was out here, travelling by myself?"

"Yeah…" Fen thought back. "You said you lived with your family on a mountain. You always wanted to fight and explore, but your parents wanted you to help out collecting food and things?"

Ryu nodded. "That's… mostly true. I was annoyed by how they always wanted me to help out with the family, like looking after the younger 'mon or getting supplies. More important to me than just fighting, though, was everything surrounding evolution. I know you asked me about it before, but… I lied then about how much importance it has to me."

He rubbed his face with his paws. "The thing is… as long as I'm this tall, with only little bumps on my wrists, there's a limit to how strong I can be. Most 'mon evolve whenever their body knows its limit, but I don't. There's a secret to it that my parents know but refused to tell me, and I've been trying for so long to figure it out. I trained myself at fighting as much as I could. Some days I'd be out from dawn till dusk around the mountains, fighting until I could barely stand, but no matter how hard I tried I never felt anything different. All it did was make my parents mad since I had jobs to be doing, and… well, we never had a good relationship from then.

"I eventually figured that my evolution couldn't be purely due to fighting, because I should have reached that point by now; and why wouldn't I get told if it was so simple? But despite that, whenever I lose any fight a part of me wonders if that was my big *chance* to evolve, that it'll be another, I don't know, ten moons until I get another one. Or that I might *never* get another one. Especially since the fight with the Dark. What she did… it made me feel so useless. There's no way someone that weak deserves to evolve."

Fen had never suspected Ryu could be hurting so much. He felt ashamed for it. "Why is evolution so important to you?" he asked. "Just so you can be stronger?"

"That's part of it," Ryu said. "I mean, that's the appeal for everyone. I love fighting, and I love figuring out ways I can be better at it. But also… there are things that I'm scared of. Ghosts. That feeling of absolute *fear* is what I hate the most… it makes me do all kinds of stupid stuff that I regret. I don't want to ever feel like that. I know that Lucario can harness Steel techniques alongside my Fighter ones, as well as everything they can do with aura… so if I evolved, I'd be able to attack those Ghosts properly. That's the real reason, I guess…" He let out a *hmph.* "It's pathetic, I know. Not wanting to be scared of anything."

At that moment, Fen wished more than anything that he could help Ryu out, to stop his personal torment. But as far as solving the

mystery to Ryu's evolution was concerned, he felt as powerless as the Riolu did.

"What led to you leaving your family?" Fen asked.

"Well, I lied about persuading my parents to let me leave," Ryu said. "I'd *tried* persuading them before to let me explore alone for a few days or something, but they'd always said no. The last day I was at home, m-my dad had sent me to gather some food from down the mountain, and I was really annoyed with him since I was always doing that job, and I wanted to go exploring instead… *and* I was frustrated as ever with not being able to evolve. I argued against him really strongly, saying he wasn't being fair to me because I was the eldest, but he wasn't listening, and I f-felt so angry with him, I just… I just… !"

He couldn't seem to bring himself to utter the last words. "I lost control," he murmured. "I scratched him. A bit like what I did to you in the forest the day we met, but worse. I swore, too… threw as many words at him as I could in my rage. I said things I didn't mean, about how I wanted nothing to do with him and our family… Mew, it was awful. I've never snapped at anyone like that."

Fen felt surprised at how much Ryu had built up the event. Didn't everyone argue with their parents? And didn't Pokémon fight each other all the time? Maybe Ryu had said some regrettable things, but… it couldn't be that bad, could it? He carefully raised these thoughts.

"You don't understand, Fen," Ryu sighed. His voice was a whisper. "Our species, since we're quite scarce to begin with, we're incredibly protective of our own kind, our family. That means you have to respect each other, especially your elders. I can fight my siblings, sure, but to go and attack my own father in the way that I did… it's totally unforgivable. And as soon as I did it, I realised how bad a mistake it was. I was terrified about what was going to happen to me. The worst punishment I had was when I was out too late and had to sleep outside overnight… when I got back I had to stay indoors for a

whole day, pretty much starved of food too. Maybe my dad would have done that to me for several days… maybe he *would* have forgiven me, I don't know. At that moment there was only one idea in my head I could see. I told you about how I run when I'm scared, didn't I?"

Fen nodded.

"That's what I did. I grabbed a bag we used to collect food and water, then ran. I ran away from home." Ryu paused after those words, arms trembling. " *I ran away, Fen!"* he repeated tearfully. "I just… I just don't have a home anymore!"

Fen couldn't take it any longer. He put his arms around Ryu before the Riolu could say no. Thankfully, Ryu did not pull away from him, and after a few seconds tentatively moved his arms to fulfil his side of the hug.

Then he did pull away, a little calmer, and spoke again. "As much as I talk down on them… my family mean so much to me. Like I said, I left them on my own. Before *we* met, I was completely on my own. So I need to go back and apologise. I don't know if they'll forgive me, but… I have to try. I can't bear this much guilt."

Fen waited a moment before asking, as sympathetically as he could, "Why didn't you tell me this earlier?"

"Because… I wanted to look like I knew what I was doing, I guess." Ryu looked puzzled by the question. "I'm not sure why. I thought that if I'd told you the truth then you might have a bad opinion of me, and…." He trailed off.

"You know," Fen said, "you could have told me practically *anything* back then and I would've followed you. I was completely reliant on you."

"But I didn't even *want* to travel with anyone," Ryu said. "Not to begin with, anyway… I wanted to go it alone. Then you showed up, and…

in the state you were in, I couldn't really leave you behind. Even though you basically tagged yourself along…

"W-wait!" Ryu yelped suddenly, before Fen had even opened his mouth. "No, I don't mean it like that… I'm different to how I was then! I would never think of leaving you behind now!"

"Ryu, it's okay," Fen said, slightly taken aback by the Riolu's panic. "I understand exactly what you mean. But really, I don't care how you *felt* about it then… all I know is that, from the moment we met, you've given me more help that I could ever possibly hope to repay you for. I can hardly express how grateful I am for it all."

Ryu took a while to reply. He seemed so pained that Fen could hardly bear looking at him. "I don't deserve that, but… okay."

Fen's chest loosened, but only a little. He tried another approach. "Are we close to your home from here?"

"Well… no," Ryu mumbled. "That's kinda the problem. The route we're supposed to be following doesn't cross Mt. Aura. We'd need to go off track for a while, which would take us at least a day longer. I assume you won't want to detour, so-"

"Ryu," Fen said, firmly enough that Ryu looked at him properly. "I'm going with you. It's the very *least* I can do. You deserve as much help as I can give."

A glimmer of a smile appeared on Ryu's face. "Thanks, but… I don't know how much you can help me. Outsiders aren't normally allowed in our cove."

"I'll do whatever I can."

"Well… I appreciate that," Ryu said sheepishly. "We can start heading that way immediately, then. I've done this rough path before."

Ryu unhooked the bag and took a very long swig of water. Then he shook himself and jumped down from their rock, the grass squelching as he landed. Fen made the same move, his feet stinging a little.

"Fen, could you hold your right arm out for me?" Ryu asked suddenly.

Fen raised his eyebrows at such an odd request, but Ryu's look told him it was serious. When he obliged, Ryu slapped his right palm into his, then pulled Fen towards him before slapping him, friendlily, on the back with his left arm. A sort of man-hug, Fen thought. Ryu held it for a few seconds before pulling away.

"That's how Fighters greet, 'case you were wondering," Ryu explained. "I thought I should say thank you the proper way. Just… for listening to me. It's good not be hiding things anymore."

Fen couldn't think of much to respond with, but he nodded back appreciatively. "Glad I could help."

Ryu nodded, as if to confirm something to himself, then gazed inquisitively into the mountains beyond.

"Enough talking, anyway… we've got a Wailord of travelling ahead."

Return

Being exposed to the soaking grass turned out to be a non-issue for Fen, as Ryu led them almost immediately into steep, drier mountains. Their sheer rockiness and lack of any path meant that much of their morning was spent scrambling rather than walking. The persistent fog made it difficult to see ahead, too, meaning they came almost face to face with a couple of Aron, the first Pokémon they'd seen that day.

The two Steel 'mon instantly lunged at them in attack, but their density made them slow through the air, and Fen easily evaded his attacker before firing embers at it. Ryu responded to the second Aron in similar fashion with a force palm. The Aron were tiny even for Fen, and let out weak cries as they went down. He guessed that they were young, but before he could ask there was a rumbling from a rock wall to their right.

A Pokémon burst out of an opening and rose to its full, monstrous height in front of them, at least four times Fen's own. It was covered in steel and rock armour like the Aron, but this looked impenetrably thick on the larger 'mon. One of its limbs looked big enough on its own to stomp Fen into the ground.

The Aggron glanced at the Aron that were lying in pain, then turned its attention to Fen and Ryu, humming a low growl.

"Get out," it said forcefully, standing protectively over the Aron. Its voice sounded like two stones being crushed together.

Ryu seemed surprised, taking a step back. "Hey… the Aron attacked us first, 'mon. We're only passing through here anyway…"

The Aggron didn't take kindly to him, roaring a titanic cry that must have woken half the Pokémon in the mountain range. It took two

stomps towards them as they took two back. "Get out of our territory!" it ordered, lowering its head threateningly.

Fen looked nervously at Ryu, hoping he would see sense. Surely they couldn't win a battle against this thing? The Aggron wasn't even blocking their route; they only needed to do what it was asking and they'd be safe. As long as they didn't try and fight it… *please, Ryu?*

Ryu looked back at him, and for a moment there was a wild look in his eyes, one he'd had in previous fights. But then the wildness evaporated, and Ryu scurried away from the Aggron, leaving Fen to follow.

"Did you know that Aggron was going to appear?" Fen asked, once they had slowed down.

"Of course not," Ryu replied agitatedly. "I don't understand why… they were the ones that attacked us! It's not like that was some crazy wild; the Aron were its children, and they clearly had a home. I've never been threatened like that, and I've been around this area all my life. But… it feels off today. Unwelcoming, somehow."

"It must be the storm," Fen said. Ryu gave him a quizzical look. "What else could it be? The storm at Hidden Wood did strange things too, making those Ghosts appear."

"Mm," Ryu sounded edgy at just the mention of Ghosts. He scratched his ear as he considered. "I'm not sure. But if you're right, we could be in for plenty of fights today."

"But we don't *have* to fight anyone," Fen said. "You said so the other day."

"That is true," Ryu said. "And I don't want to sidetrack our main goal any longer than needed." He thought for a second, then nodded firmly. "Okay. Today, let's avoid fights wherever possible. That way we should still get to Mt. Aura by nightfall."

He glanced at Fen. "You should walk on all-fours; I'll do the same. Keep your senses alert for any signs of 'mon, and don't let them see you. In this weather it's difficult to be seen, anyway."

"Alright." Fen paused. "You can walk on all-fours?"

Ryu shrugged. "'Course I can." He dropped his upper body and put his arms down underneath him in one smooth movement. His walking pace didn't drop as his arms and legs alternated steps. Fen noted how his own walk, by contrast, was more of a pull forwards with his front legs.

"This is what I did as a hatchling, before I could stand up properly," Ryu said, somewhat wistfully. "It makes a change, though it's a bit too close to the ground."

Fen agreed; he felt small enough standing on two feet.

Regardless, they went solely four-legged for the rest of the day. Despite the unfavourable conditions and the extra need to be stealthy, Fen still found he loved the experience of mountaineering, for reasons he couldn't quite put into words. The mountains just felt *right* . But if Ryu shared his opinion, he didn't let it show, getting progressively quieter and tenser as time went on. When they passed over one peak in the late evening, getting a fresh if slightly hazy view of the horizon, Ryu froze.

"There's my home," he muttered, pointing ahead.

The grey mountain was smaller than Fen expected, and had nothing visually unique from those they'd already seen. Its location was what stood out more; a small woodland, complete with a water stream, was located in a neat ring around the mountain's base. Convenient as it was for food and water, the woodland starkly separated the mountain from those surrounding it.

"It looks a pretty isolated place," Fen observed.

"Huh," Ryu said with a hint of amusement. "I agree, but none of the others seem to care. I think my parents like the solitude of this mountain, so they can be sure our family's safe and stuff. But I definitely would've lived in a place like Sanguin Town if I had the chance."

The actual location of Ryu's 'home' was obvious; even in the fog Fen could see a sizable opening in the rock, at about two-thirds of the mountain's height. It was hard to make out how far the crevice extended, but there was a path carved from its entrance that wound downwards towards the foot of the mountain.

"Are your family the only ones that live here?" Fen asked.

Ryu nodded. "That's why we call it Mt. Aura. It doesn't really have a proper name."

Fen frowned back. "What *is* this 'aura' you talk about? How does it relate to you? You mentioned it yesterday, but I didn't ask."

"You… don't know about aura?"

"I can't remember anything."

"Right. I should've expected that," Ryu said apologetically. "I'll try and explain."

He clicked his wrist bumps together as he thought. "Think of aura as the pure energy you live on, that you survive with. Everyone has it, but most 'mon can't see and utilise this energy; it just *exists* for them. Lucario are one of the few species that *can* see aura, hence the mountain name. If you're aware of aura it gives you all kinds of abilities: you can transfer it into attacks, create protective barriers, use it as light sources… even do some telepathic things with it."

Fen blinked. "'Telepathic things'… you mean, sensing the thoughts and feelings of others?"

"Uh… I guess that's part of it…"

"But, Ryu!" Fen exclaimed. "Haven't you done this with me before? Sensing my thoughts?"

For a moment Ryu stared at him like he'd been transformed back into a human. "I've done what?" he barked. "Are you crazy?"

Fen was just as surprised as him. Ryu sounded almost accusatory. "Well… there's been a number of times where you've picked up on what I've been thinking, based off very little. Like at Mt. Horizon, when I felt down about not knowing my family, and you knew something was bothering me. Then yesterday, when you barely looked at me but knew that I was thinking of getting to the shelter… I feel like this has happened too much to just be coincidence. I don't know if you even realise you're doing it, but-"

"Fen." Ryu looked at him disbelievingly. "I *can't* do it. I… look, y'see these?" He pointed to the black appendages hanging loosely off the sides of his head. For the first time, Fen noticed how much they stood out for something with no clear purpose.

"These are my aura sensors," Ryu said. "Once they're fully developed, I'm supposed to be able to use aura like Lucario can. But they don't develop fully *until I evolve*, so right now they're useless. I can't do anything with aura, which means I can't do any telepathic stuff. However you got this idea that I'm reading your thoughts… it's not possible."

Fen paused. *It is strange for Ryu to be doing something supposedly beyond his current form. But Ryu doesn't know the secret to his own evolution; what if there are other properties of his species that he's unaware of, like this?*

"You've never felt like you've been reading my thoughts, or anything?" Fen asked.

"No," Ryu said tersely. He shook his head and turned back towards Mt. Aura. "We can talk about this later. I need to get everything here resolved tonight, while it's quiet. I don't feel like creating a huge scene by turning up in the morning."

Fen could understand Ryu's urgency, but he glanced doubtfully at the sky, which was rapidly darkening. His body seemed hard-wired to become sleepy as soon as darkness fell, and the fatigue from travelling all day was becoming apparent.

"Even if we're quick," he said, "to climb down this cliff and then ascend Aura would take a couple hours at least…"

"However long two hours is, I've already planned for it," Ryu replied brusquely. "You're not gonna fall asleep, trust me."

It turned out that one of the fruits growing in the neighbouring woodland was a hard, pink-and-blue berry called a chesto, which had a side-effect that Ryu called 'increased wakefulness'. Though Fen wasn't sure what to expect after eating one, he found the energy rush equivalent to drinking about four cups of coffee in one. It staved off sleep, all right; he wondered if he'd ever feel like sleeping again.

They had to fight off a couple of wild Bugs inside the woodland, but the rest of the journey passed quickly in their energised states, until the opening to Mt. Aura stood in front of them. They both stopped.

Although Ryu was shivering slightly, he had a look on his face so hardened that he might have been choosing to walk to his death, rather than his old home. Fen hoped that wasn't an indicator for what would happen to them.

"You ready?" Fen ready.

Ryu's paws were white from being clenched so hard, but he nodded them onwards into the gap, which was wide enough to fit them both. Though Fen's tail was their only light source, Ryu's surefootedness suggested he'd trodden the path a thousand times before. Fen was

surprised at how long the passage stretched for, and at how smooth the whole structure was. It felt like a place very well cared for.

Ryu stopped where the path forked right around a chunk of rock. A few metres ahead it was blocked entirely by a circular boulder.

"Wait on this corner so you aren't seen. Keep yourself hidden," Ryu whispered. He looked down briefly, fiddling with his paws, before glancing up again. "And thanks for sticking with me," he added, offering the slightest of smiles.

Fen pushed himself up against the rock wall, trying to cover his tail light as best as he could. He watched as Ryu walked up to the boulder and hit it three times in a rhythm with the backs of his paws, the metallic sound echoing harshly through the tunnel. Almost immediately, the side facing away from them was illuminated in a blue glow. Then the boulder itself was rolled aside.

Fen could only peek around the corner at the creature standing before Ryu, but he could immediately tell it was his evolved form. The Lucario's body was the same combination of sapphire blue and jet black colours, with the exception of its yellow-furred torso. Its face had similar black markings around the eyes, and it had two, rather than one, larger aura sensors either side of its head. Its snout, ears and tail were longer and thicker than Ryu's, and the metal bumps on its paws were pointier, at least an inch in length. Fen was surprised at how slim the Lucario was, though its muscles were impressively defined.

In its hand floated a blue ball of energy, the source of the glow. It was so bright that had it been any larger than its candle flame size, Fen thought he would have been lit up too. He found himself almost inexorably drawn towards the light, such was its wonder to him. It had to be the aura Ryu described.

The Lucario looked at Ryu with an almost apologetic expression. If it was surprised to see him, the emotion was well hidden.

"Mother," Ryu greeted shakily, sounding unusually formal.

The Lucario continued to stare at him. "Rycaro," she said. "Come."

She turned and led Ryu deeper into the cavern beyond. Fen could only make out their voices from his position, grateful his hearing was so acute.

A different, deeper voice murmured the same word as before. "Rycaro."

Then, its tone suddenly turned harsh. "Why have you returned? Before you ran away, you told me that we were worthless to you, that you were better off without us. You attacked me yourself. So what could bring you back here?"

Ryu started to stutter something, but the deeper voice intervened.

"In fact, before you explain, hand the bag over."

"W-what?" Ryu managed to squeak. "But I've always carried this bag… whenever I was collecting food, or-"

" *Must I tell you again?* " The voice was so fierce that Fen winced at the sound. "It is not *your* bag, Rycaro. You know our rules. The slashes inscribed in this bag were made using aura, and you cannot be entrusted with it until you can harness the same power as its maker. You stole it from here, and I expect it returned."

After a momentary hesitation, Fen heard the bag being slid from Ryu's back. Ryu hadn't mentioned that it wasn't strictly his, and panic began rushing through Fen as he realised how fatal an oversight that could be. The bag contained so much of importance; directions, food, Scout's items, his water protection… if they left here without it, they might as well give up their journey. He couldn't believe how easily Ryu had forfeited it.

"Now, I will ask you again," the voice said. "What could bring you back here?"

Though Ryu's voice shook, he wasn't interrupted. "Father, I… made mistakes, I know that. I wanted to evolve, and I still do, but that desire made me selfish, it made me forget about what was important. I know the responsibility I have, being the eldest sibling, and… I wasn't thinking about that when I struck you and ran away. All I can do is apologise."

Ryu's father spoke heavily. "Rycaro, your discipline always made you an outlier to your siblings; that I can tolerate. In this case, however, you have disrespected me, abandoned your duties to your family, and stolen from us. You may be sorry, but to return now, telling me that you should be forgiven, and that you want to return to this family… it is difficult to see how you deserve it."

Fen half-expected Ryu's father to order that Ryu leave there and then, but the cavern was hushed for a long time; the only sound being the scattered breathing of Pokémon. It seemed they were all waiting for Ryu to respond.

"I'm… I'm not asking if I can return to the family," Ryu eventually said.

This time the female Lucario spoke. "Then why did you come back?"

"I met someone while I was away, not long after leaving here," Ryu said. "He woke up in Cheri Forest without any memories of his past, and we're looking for a way for him to get them back. We've still got a long way to travel, and I was planning to leave after I talked to you. I don't want to argue about what I did… I know it's probably too much to ever be forgiven for. I j-just wanted to tell you that I do regret what happened, and… despite what I said then, I still love you all, and I always will."

His voice had quietened to a whisper by the end, and another pause followed. "Who is this Pokémon you met?" Ryu's father demanded.

"Is he here?"

"He's just outside," Ryu said.

"Could we meet him?" his father asked, sounding less aggressive despite his bluntness of words.

Fen couldn't imagine many more terrifying situations than being in front of the Pokémon who'd already ripped his son's pleas to pieces. But he'd agreed to help Ryu however he could; if this was what that meant, then so be it.

At first, he was puzzled at why Ryu had said their journey was specifically to get his memories back, but the more he considered it, the more it made sense. Saying that he wanted to figure out the cause of recent unusual weather hadn't impressed Faoz or Savi; he figured that Ryu's family would likely have the same 'don't interfere' attitude towards it. So although Ryu hadn't *lied*, he had presented their goals as something more… understandable, perhaps. And that just happened to bring him into this equation.

Ryu emerged from the opening, looking oddly incomplete without his bag. He had the strength to meet Fen's eye, but he appeared as distraught as he'd sounded. He knew Fen had been listening, so they only exchanged a silent nod before Fen followed him inside the cavern.

Two Lucario stood in the centre of the room, and Fen could immediately tell Ryu's parents apart. The now male Lucario was several inches taller than the female alongside him, and everything about him was sharper; his ears and snout were more pointed and the bumps on his paws had become spikes, their white tips gleaming. He seemed to exude authority.

The cavern itself was far bigger than Fen had expected, easily spacious enough for ten or so Pokémon to live in. There were a few rocks on the walls and ceiling that glowed a faint blue, casting a mystical atmosphere over the place, though the female Lucario still

held her pebble of light. Fen was again in awe of what he assumed was another work of aura.

An indentation in the ground to his left showed seven more Riolu of various sizes, all smaller than Ryu, sitting up on grass-like bedrolls. Their closeness suggested they had been asleep, but all of them were now staring wide-eyed at Fen as he walked up with Ryu. It only made him more uneasy; why on earth did Ryu's father want to meet him?

Ryu's father surprised Fen by getting on one knee to meet him closer to eye level. The Lucario's aura sensors twitched momentarily as he examined him. "Chimchar," he said, a curious hint in his voice. "You have been travelling with my son?"

"Yes," Fen answered. He hoped there wasn't a formal 'sir' he was missing.

The Lucario spoke carefully. "I can sense an anxiety within you, so I wish to reassure that I mean you no harm. I only care to understand what brought you here with Rycaro. May I ask your name, if you should have one?"

So Ryu's father could sense his emotions, no doubt. What Fen didn't understand was: why had the Lucario had been so polite? His manner was totally different to the hostility he'd shown towards his own son. Fen assumed that most people would soften up a bit if they knew about his memory condition, as Ryu's father did. *Even so… do I deserve this much respect?*

"My name's Fen," he said.

The Lucario nodded. "As I go by the same name as your friend, you may simply call me Lucario."

Fen had to stop himself from gawping. *He's called Rycaro too! That means he passed his name down to Ryu, his eldest child, and… did*

Ryu not want to use it? Maybe that's why his father's so angry with him!

Although, Ryu and Rycaro are still similar *names… If Ryu had told me a completely different one, I'd assume that he wanted nothing to do with his father…*

"My son tells that you have lost your memory," Rycaro continued, looking unexpectedly mournful. "Such a situation is not something I can ever recall, and you have my deepest sympathy." He paused respectfully. "Now, could you explain how you and Rycaro crossed paths?"

Leaving out his humanity, Fen recounted waking up in Cheri Forest, realising his lack of memories, then how his panic at the rain led to him and Ryu running into each other.

"I was completely lost, and felt pretty terrified because of it. Since Ry-" He hesitated over the name. "Since Rycaro was the only 'mon I'd met since waking, I asked if I could travel with him."

"And you have been with him ever since?"

"Pretty much," Fen said. He thought he might have a grasp on what the elder Rycaro was interested in. "I was really struggling at first since I couldn't remember how to fight. Rycaro fought a lot just to protect me, which I'm really glad for. Since we got to Sanguin Town I was able to remember more about myself and improve my fighting, but I doubt I would have made it at that far without him."

Ryu's father hummed, of which the implication was uncertain. "What led you both here?"

Given what Ryu's said, that's a difficult question, Fen thought . Their *actual* journey to figure out the natural disasters, on the face of it, didn't match up with Ryu's story at all. The biggest link between the disasters and Fen's memory were in the emotion attacks he had suffered three times now. And after Ryu had remarked what strange

phenomena they were, he hadn't mentioned those to anyone but him.

Yet Rycaro, if Fen discounted how the Lucario had spoken to Ryu, seemed fairly wise and understanding. *Plus, if Rycaro can sense my emotions, he'd know if I'm telling the truth… right? Either way, I'd be playing a dangerous game by lying.*

So he told Rycaro about the unusual weather, and the sudden flashes of emotion that had hit him as he was falling asleep. He revealed the Absol they'd spotted - the first mention he'd made of that to anyone - and how that led him to want to find one. Then how they'd learned that Darkrai's Knot was the most likely place to find Absol, and that Ryu had agreed to go there with him. And, of course, the hope that his memories may be linked to it all.

He found it slightly worrying that Ryu didn't even attempt to add to his story, just standing quietly. The elder Rycaro listened carefully, and Fen noticed the 'mon's sensors twitch a couple more times while he recounted events.

"Your theory about the natural disasters is not something I had thought about," Rycaro murmured once Fen finished. "Whether it is correct, I could not say, but I do not doubt the truth of your experiences. Your tale is remarkable, Fen; I have heard many great myths and legends in my time, yet yours is unlike any. It does make one wonder if forces like those might be guiding your path."

Whoever's guiding me must be a pretty cruel being, then, Fen thought.

Ryu's father continued. "I understand that you have a great desire to complete this journey. And along with that, your friendship with Rycaro is equally as strong."

"Absolutely!" Fen said, with a little excessive enthusiasm. He sensed that this had to be good for Ryu's cause. "We're a team, and we need to stick together."

Rycaro turned to the female Lucario, but rather than speaking they just looked intently at each other for about 30 seconds.

"While I sympathise with you greatly Fen, and I do not wish to call you a stranger, you are not from our blood," Rycaro said eventually. "Unfortunately, you cannot stay here even for a single night. And Rycaro, given you are his travelling partner, the same must apply to you."

"Yes, father," Ryu murmured, looking despondent.

"However," Rycaro went on, "We do not want to stand in the way of your journey; I believe completing it would be in both of your best interests. Therefore, though it is hard to forgive your stealing from our family, Rycaro…" He picked up their bag of supplies and held it out to Ryu, "you may keep this bag a little longer. I see how dearly you require it."

At first Ryu took a step back, then hesitated to even touch the bag in his shock. "T-thank you?" he gasped.

When he finally took the bag, his father spoke again. "Rycaro… despite what has passed, we do not wish to banish you from here. I urge you to leave us for now, and you should decide for yourself, when the time is right, if you want to return. Fen, though I doubt we will meet again, I pray that all can be resolved for you. Both Arcia and I give you our best wishes." The female alongside him, who had to be Arcia, bowed her head to him.

Ryu looked over at the younger Riolu, and back at his parents. "Could I say goodbye quickly?"

"Of course," Arcia said.

Ryu thanked her gratefully, and Fen watched while he went over to his siblings, exchanging hushed words and several Fighter-hugs.

Suddenly Fen felt a mental force hit his consciousness, and a voice - no, *Rycaro's* voice - spoke quickly inside his head. " *Fen, you and Rycaro's friendship matters more than perhaps you realise. I know that Rycaro wishes to evolve, but while that secret is one that he can only learn himself, I can say that with you by his side, he is on the correct path. I hope you continue travelling together.*

" *Additionally… though only slightly, I noticed that your aura bears the mark of something else; a power far greater than your own. Much like your story, it is difficult to make sense of; unlike anything I have sensed before. I am sorry that I cannot help further, but I thought you should know. Good luck."*

The pressure on Fen's mind retreated. He blinked a few times. Rycaro was still standing in front of him, as if nothing had happened, but his eyes had a knowing look to them. Fen wanted to reply in the same telepathic way, but even if he somehow had that ability, he had no idea how to use it, and Rycaro had only left him more confused than before.

A greater power? Either there's some humanness in my aura that Rycaro can sense, or it's something else about me… the only other thing I can think of are the emotion attacks. Rycaro did suggest that some mythical force might be guiding my path, but it was only a suggestion… he doesn't know…

"Fen? Are you ready?"

Ryu was back, and though slightly sad looking he held himself up high on his tiptoes, as if determined to act strong.

Is my aura different because I was once a human?

Fen looked at Rycaro again. *Rycaro doesn't know that I was, though. I could ask him… but who knows how he'd respond? And just after getting our bag back, I'm not putting our journey in jeopardy again. Rycaro already said that he didn't understand what he'd seen in my aura… knowing I'm a human surely wouldn't help him.*

Didn't Ryu say that aura was like the energy everyone lives on? Physically, there doesn't seem any difference between me and an ordinary Chimchar, and if there is, no-one's picked up on it. But if the strange aura isn't *related with me being a human, what else could it be?*

He sighed inwardly. *The greatest mystery is how I ended up like this in the first place. Until I figure* that *out, I'd bet that these other questions will remain unanswerable. What I'd do to know the answers…*

"Sorry. Yeah, I'm ready," he said to Ryu.

With that, Ryu re-fastened the bag around his back, and said a final goodbye to his family. He led Fen out of the cavern without a backwards glance.

Ryu kept going once outside, manoeuvring Mt. Aura with such ease that Fen had to ask him to slow down. *He* could barely see a thing.

"Sorry," Ryu said. "I just wanna get far enough away from here. You heard what my dad said: we shouldn't even stay on the same mountain."

Ryu's voice was steady now, but Fen still waited until they were far from the Riolu's home, under the familiar cover of a rock, before he asked any more.

"Ryu, are you… okay with what happened?" he asked.

Ryu let out a sigh, but it was a contented one. "Yeah, I am. I mainly wanted my family to know how sorry I feel. That's what I'd been feeling so awful about. And what I feared was for Dad to ignore that, and tell me to stay away from them forever… 'Cause like I said, I still love my family and I want to see them again sometime. I didn't expect to be totally forgiven, but I couldn't have hoped for much of a better response. And considering what *nearly* happened… I'd

completely forgotten about the bag for a start, and if I'd lost that, then… I wouldn't have been able to forgive myself.

"I have to thank you though, Fen; you really saved my tail," Ryu added. "I'm not sure I'd have gotten the bag back if my parents hadn't taken such a liking to you. I mean, no offence, but I didn't expect them to! You heard how the rules usually are."

Fen nodded. He was pretty sure he knew why he'd been treated so kindly, but didn't think it would be right to share Rycaro's private sentiment now.

"I thought your dad was really harsh on you when you arrived," Fen said. "I get that you did some bad things, but… I don't know, he's your *dad.* It sounded almost like he didn't *want* to see you."

Ryu eyed Fen curiously. "Really? How he reacted was more or less what I expected. What would your parents have done?"

A brief pause. "Wait, Mew, forget that," Ryu said quickly. "Sorry if I-"

"Nah, it's fine." Fen smiled. "I'm hardly in a position to give parenting advice, but I just thought yours would be more forgiving, considering you'd disappeared for so long. But speaking of parents… what's with the name they called you?"

"Rycaro?" Ryu shifted uncomfortably. "My fault for not mentioning anything. It's a name that's been passed down through our family for quite a while. My siblings originally called me Ry, which worked to distinguish me from Dad, but it didn't feel like a proper name. Then I came up with adding the 'u' at the end, since it's at the end of my species name. Sharing the same name as my dad always made me a bit uncomfortable… and Rycaro just reminds me a lot of Lucario, which I'm not, obviously. That's why I've been calling myself Ryu. Good job for improvising with it, though," he added with a smirk.

Fen hummed in approval. "So what should I call you now?"

"Huh? Call me Ryu, 'mon. I ain't changing my name again."

Fen laughed. "Alright." With the chesto-caffeine wearing off, he was starting to face a power struggle with his eyelids, but he still wanted to ask questions.

"That ball of light your mother had was aura, wasn't it?"

"Mm."

"I just want to say…" He smiled at the thought of it. "It's mind-blowing, the stuff they can do with it. The lights inside the rocks as well! *And* your bag, I never knew about that! Does the aura do something there, too?"

Ryu didn't return his excitement. "Aura's not as amazing as you think," he said. "It only works on your body's existing energy. While *I* haven't done it, I know that creating enough aura to light up one of those rocks would seriously tire you out."

"Oh," Fen said, slightly deflated.

"As for the bag… another thing about aura is that it wears off over time. This bag is Relicanth age, so I doubt there's much of it left now. I never knew what the aura did to it. I think the main point is to give a reason not to take it like I did."

"The bag's… 'Relicanth age?'" Fen repeated. "It looks in really good condition, though. What if… maybe the aura's made it more durable?"

Ryu's eyes widened for a second, then he shrugged. "I hadn't thought of that, but it could be true. Anything else you wanna ask?" he added wearily.

Fen got what his tone was implying, and felt pretty tired himself. "No," he said. "I… think you deserve some rest, 'mon. It's been a long day."

Ryu nodded, satisfied, then curled himself up to sleep.

Ryu really doesn't like talking about aura, Fen reflected, *and he's always downplayed it when he has done. I guess not having the ability weighs on his mind a lot.*

He repeated Rycaro's words to him on Ryu's desire to evolve. " *With you by his side, he is on the correct path."*

Fen sighed at the ambiguity of it; the last thing he needed were more mysteries to think about. He shuffled around in the rock until he could curl up comfortably, and finally closed his eyes.

I really hope you're right, Rycaro.

Firepower

The next three days were low key compared with what Fen had grown used to. To get back on Faoz's route towards Glyciak Mountain, they needed to follow the path going to the volcano Arkan. But given the remote location of Mt. Aura, they crossed almost the whole width of Ractyl's Belt in doing so. Their route was certainly unconventional, judging by the awkwardness of the mountains they crossed, and they frequently had to resort to rock climbing around the edges of them.

Until this morning the weather had remained misty and stormy, though no rainfall was on the same level as the one on the night of Fen's last emotion attack. While the civilised 'mon on the mountains were still not as friendly as Ryu said he remembered, they were usually happy to fight when challenged. These battles were a little more restrained than those with wilds, but they tired and bruised just the same.

Fen didn't mind the fights slowing them down slightly; he knew that he needed the practice for their supposed challenges ahead. Plus, he had improved enough for Ryu to finally start fighting with him, and they passed many interesting hours discussing possible strategies and combinations.

On the fourth morning since Mt. Aura, they left the mountain belt and were crossing a rocky valley separating them from the volcano. The sun was out for the first time in days, to Fen's relief; he'd had to wear Cyan's coat for most of the intervening time, and while he was glad to have the water protection, the itches he was getting were becoming unbearable.

He sniffed the air now, unsure why he had until he picked up a smell of ash. He felt a tingle of excitement with it, even though Arkan was already visible in front of them. There were two features that distinguished it from the surrounding mountains: one was its colour,

a charcoal black that seemed to almost glitter in the sunlight, standing out from the sea of greys they'd been crossing. The other was a jagged circular opening at its peak, though no steam or lava seemed to be rising from it.

Fen had to remind himself that the volcano was only a landmark to cross, not an end point of their journey. Still, he'd been intrigued by the place ever since Cyan had told him what a good idea it would be to go there, and that information was clearly playing on his instincts too.

They climbed for a few more hours, hardly reaching a third of the volcano's vast altitude, before seeing a couple of yellow-and-white furred Pokémon emerge from an opening in the rock. The taller one, who had a stick in its tail and tufts of fur falling from its ears, eyed them both curiously, particularly Ryu. Then it hurried past, chasing the four-legged 'mon running ahead of it.

Intrigued, Fen got closer to the opening. It was twice the size of the tunnel that went into Mt. Aura. He could see light in the distance, and hear a murmuring of voices, but the most striking feature was the heat. It felt revitalising after so much travelling.

"Do you think this is the place Cyan lived?" he asked Ryu.

"Dunno, but I'm not going near it," came the voice, oddly far away. Fen turned and was alarmed to see Ryu standing back from him, his face and paws practically dripping with sweat.

Ryu noted his reaction and smirked. "Y'see, I think my whole coat's gonna fall off if I get much closer to there."

Fen tried to gauge the temperature on Ryu's scale, but frustratingly found it impossible. To him, the temperature was perfect. "I didn't realise it would be too hot…"

"I mean, it's a volcano," Ryu said. "It's what I expected."

Fen looked between him and the opening awkwardly. He really had a strong urge to go inside. "Uh… do you mind if I take a look in here?"

"Nah, it's fine," Ryu said. "We've been travelling pretty hard recently; I don't mind a rest. This seems like a pretty safe area. I can check that we know where this Smouldered Pass is, then look for water or something."

Smouldered Pass was the next marker on their route - a gnarled, ash-coloured forest judging by their map illustration.

"Are you sure?" Fen asked.

"'Mon, I'm not staying here." Ryu smiled. "I can see what you wanna do. Just call me when you're done, uh… being warm… I won't go very far."

Maybe it was just because he was keen to get out of the heat, but Fen doubted that Ryu would have been so accommodating on their first few adventures. He was happy for the change.

"I won't be gone long," he assured.

Ryu nodded affirmatively. "See ya later then."

Fen turned back to the volcano opening and began walking inside. The thickness of rock blocked out all noise from outside, magnifying the sound of his feet padding against the surface. For once, he could really *feel* the temperature in here, the heat washing over him; it felt as comforting as what he imagined a hot bath would be like for his human-self.

The voices he'd heard from inside became clearer, but it was still hard to make out words. All Fen could tell was that a squawky voice was talking very excitedly with a much more level-sounding one. Then before he knew it, the tunnel opened into a room.

The brightness of the area he stepped into was dazzling. He instinctively squinted upwards, away from the light, and saw that the room had been constructed all the way to the volcano's open mouth, its arch-like walls following the same shape as the mountain's exterior. The room seemed to be built around a high, circular podium of rock, which stood directly below the mouth.

As he lowered his gaze, trying to take everything from the vast room in, he was stunned at the number of Pokémon in front of him - it looked well over a hundred. And though there were more species than he could count here, their colours were all similar hues of reds and yellows to his own. Flaming tails and manes were in abundance, and he quickly realised that this, rather than any natural light, was what gave the room such an intense glow.

He then noticed that almost all those Pokémon were staring right at him. A few of them whispered to each other. A huge Arcanine, whose head alone was almost the size of Fen, strode very slowly over to him, and laid down vertically to meet him closer to eye-level.

"Greetings, Chimchar," he said, his hoarse voice echoing in the silence. "What is your relation here?"

Fen looked at him blankly. "I'm sorry?"

The Arcanine seemed to suppress a smile at his words. "What I mean to say is, you appear rather dazed by everything. Have you any family here? And if not, you must be seeing this place for the first time?"

"No, I don't have any family," Fen said slowly. *Why are they asking this now?* "I have a friend who used to live here, I guess… but this is my first time here."

At this, without warning, the Pokémon gathered behind the Arcanine broke into a rapturous spate of claps, cries, cheers, and blasts of fire into the air.

The Arcanine raised a paw slightly and the crowd quietened again, though their eyes remained fixed on Fen. "Well, I welcome you to Arkan, the largest home of Fires in all of Kyunn. You can call me Ark, and while I may be our leader by name, we are all in one family here."

Fen attempted to smile back, but he hated having so much attention on him. "Thanks," he said quietly. "I'm Fen."

Ark's look softened. "Ah, I apologise if we intimidate you," he said, drawing a few chuckles from the crowd. "Hopefully what I ask next will be more enjoyable. Are you aware of our initiation ceremony, regarding newcomers like yourself?"

"Initiation?" Fen repeated hesitantly. "No, I don't-"

"No matter!" Ark roared, and the rest of the crowd swelled in noise again. "You appear to be by yourself, Fen, which makes it very simple. The initiation is this: pick one of us to fight. It is entirely your choice who. Nothing rests on the outcome… except your pride, of course." The emphasis he put on *pride* suggested that this fight was, in fact, very important indeed.

What else would Pokémon have done for an initiation? Fen thought with an amused smile. He turned back to the eager-eyed crowd, who all seemed to be trying to suppress their excitement, and his smile faded. *Now, how am I supposed to choose one of* them *out of this many? I recognise a few species, but I'd never thought about them in the context of picking fights…*

"Hey, pick me, pick me!" An orange and black Pokémon broke the silence, flapping frantically above the crowd to make itself seen. Fen didn't know the species but recognised the squawks as the first muffled voice he'd heard from outside.

When Ark turned to look at the bird he quickly shut up and dropped a few feet lower. "The choice is entirely yours, Fen," Ark reminded him.

Even if the bird had broken some code of conduct, Fen was very glad to have someone put themselves forward. "Okay," he nodded at the hovering bird. "I'll take you on."

A slight pause, then another burst of cheering came from the crowd. "Very well!" Ark declared. "Charro, the Fletchinder, will fight our newest Fire, Fen!"

Ark nodded to a few Pokémon behind him, then before Fen knew what was happening a set of arms pushed him forwards, escorting him to the east side of the cave where a wide rectangular box had been marked out in the ground. This area was more scorched than any other.

He was situated on one end, with the Fletchinder named Charro landing at the other. Lowering himself into a fighting position, Fen felt oddly confident, which puzzled him considering he knew nothing about this Pokémon other than the fact it could fly.

There wasn't time to consider that, though, as Ark roared "Begin!", and the crowd burst into life once more.

Charro took off and almost immediately swooped towards Fen. The bird was too fast to avoid, its beak ramming into his face. The crowd 'oooohed' as he fell backwards. *I can't be waiting for an invitation to attack, then,* Fen thought.

He quickly sprung up, jumping four feet high towards Charro. The bird jerked back his upper body but pulled his wings in front of them, leaving them exposed to scratches. While Fen couldn't hang in the air long, he landed good swipes with both hands. It brought a squawk from Charro who shot out a burst of fire in response, though it disappeared into the air above Fen as he landed.

Fen looked for Charro in the air and saw him flying upwards, ready to build speed for another aerial assault. Once again, the bird's wings tucked into his body as he dove at Fen. This time Fen managed to scramble backwards from the beak, but Charro kept

flying forwards and his long legs kicked out, knocking Fen to the floor for a second time.

Charro had already begun his previous routine by the time Fen could face him again. He tried to think above the hum of the crowd. *He seems to just use the same attack with his beak, and while it's too fast for me to reliably avoid, the hits haven't hurt too much. He's quick, but not overly strong…*

An idea came to him. He held his arms up, and when Charro descended a third time he tried to grab a hold of the bird's head. He was a moment too late however, getting another beak to the face while his arms only clutched at hot feathers.

He heard a couple of chuckles from the crowd now, and had a growing number of aches, but he fought to retain focus. *Come on, this could still work! I just need to know the exact time he'll attack…*

Recently he had discovered a rather strange technique, but one that succeeded in its own unique way. Once a fight had begun, it had become clear that regardless of his opponent's intelligence, they expected him to fight like he meant it. They would be enraged, and attack him at once, if he showed them any kind of disinterest. As it turned out, he was very good at faking such a thing.

He had only previously done this taunting on a 'mon to act as a distraction for Ryu to attack. Nevertheless, he got onto all-fours now and pretended to scratch himself with a back leg. Though his eyes faced away from Charro, he kept him in his periphery.

The crowd howled with derision and Charro squawked, launching his usual attack. Prepared for it, Fen managed to grip one hand on Charro's beak and the other on the side of his head, but Charro squirmed furiously to free himself, and Fen lost his hold a moment later, throwing himself away from the bird.

Charro kicked him backwards before he could attempt a scratch flurry, but was hovering low to ground, trying to work some energy

back into his wings. Fen saw the opportunity for a fire attack, and breathed in.

He was suddenly overwhelmed with the energy he felt; the strength of fire in his stomach was barely enough to contain. He didn't know what this meant, but there was only thing he could do mid-action: exhale.

What he released wasn't embers but a raging stream of fire, like a flamethrower, which forced his jaws open wider than he would've thought possible. He was so stunned that the fire disappeared almost immediately, making him lose balance and tumble over.

But Charro had been left on the ground, smoking a little from the attack. When the bird tried flapping his wings again, it only propelled him a couple of feet. He lunged weakly at Fen with his beak, who was easily able to swerve it and land four twin-scratches on Charro's body. Charro toppled over, and with a final effort held up his wing in acknowledgement, before it flopped to the ground, outstretched with the rest of him.

Fen heard Ark shout something about the fight being over, then the crowd suddenly rushed towards him, handing out a mixture of congratulations, slaps on his back, a few words of advice… but he was preoccupied with himself. The rush of energy he'd felt when breathing in had died down slightly, yet his body still felt different.

As soon as he'd known that his fire came from his stomach, he'd become roughly aware of the feeling inside him. Now, not only was the sensation stronger than before, but he could feel the warmth in in his hands and feet too. *Has… something changed inside me? How did I even do that last attack?*

"Hey uh, Chimchar? Fen? You there?"

Fen refocused. The crowd was dispersing, and in front of him was a quadrupled 'mon that looked a bit like Ark but smaller, with lighter fur

and wider ears - a Flareon. It offered him a paw up, which he gratefully took.

"Are you okay? The 'mon here can go pretty wild when spectating fights… I mean it's cool, but equally exhausting when you're in the middle of it."

Fen smiled at his honesty. "Yeah, I'm okay."

The Flareon nodded. "But 'char, that was a great fight you had! I've battled Charro a few times and that strategy you used wasn't one I'd thought of. I guess fighting 'mon in the air requires some different thinking, huh?"

"Uh… yeah," Fen said vaguely. He shook himself. "Sorry… I'm trying to figure out how I breathed that much fire at once."

"Oh, you think you learned a new technique?" The Flareon looked happy. "They say that since the heat of Arkan is way hotter than most climates you'll find on Kyunn, Fire abilities come more naturally to us here. I felt something different when arrived, too."

Though it sounded slightly outlandish, the theory made more sense than anything Fen could think of. "So… the greater heat of this place released some extra fire I had, or something?" he asked.

"I think so. Not an expert on that stuff, though." The Flareon paused. "I'm Leo, by the way. Ark asked me to help show you around here, since he figured you could do with a little less attention than you were getting. Oh, and since I know your name, don't worry about the Fire greeting. Unless you really want to…"

Just then, Charro came flapping slightly breathlessly over to them. Despite losing, he looked in high spirits.

"H-hey, well battled, 'mon! Though I went a little easy on you, being new and all… but still! You're strong for jus' a hatch." He turned to Leo. "I told you I hadn't seen this guy before! Didn't I tell you?"

"Yeah, and it was a lucky guess," Leo sighed. "I know you really can't see Natu from the volcano's peak."

"Oh, you know a lot about being that high, do ya?" Charro chirped back triumphantly. "I won the bet, so you've gotta give me a free hit in our next fight!" He addressed Fen. "You don't know it Fern, but it's thanks to you that I'm finally gonna get one over Leo! If there's anything I can do to welcome you-"

" *Thanks,* Charro," Leo said, flicking an ear at the bird. "Your name was Fen, wasn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, sorry!" Charro squawked. "It's just, y'know, I thought of Monferno, and Fern, and… well, I…"

"It's fine," Fen said quickly. "Uh… what is a hatch?"

Charro blinked at him. "A 'mon that hasn't evolved. Like, they look the same as when they popped out of their egg. Roughly."

Leo nodded. "You… might wanna get used to introducing yourself though, Fen. Everyone here'll be keen to talk to you."

"Are new 'mon not very common here?" Fen enquired. Everything he'd heard and observed so far suggested as much.

Leo frowned. "Not really… the fact that this climate's only possible for Fires rules out a lot of species. I was actually the last new 'mon to walk in like you just did, since I was hatched an Eevee."

Fen faintly remembered Eevee as a species with too many evolutions to keep count of. "Did you always want to evolve into a Flareon, then?" he asked, interest piqued.

Leo looked at the floor sheepishly. "To be honest, it was a bit of an accident… I came across the stone while by myself, and only realised after touching it that it must be a special one. I could've left it

there and gone back home, but I was a little excited and… basically, it just happened right then. It took some time to adapt to all the changes that brought, but I'm really glad I did it, especially since I can live here now."

"So, Fen," Charro took over, slightly impatiently. "About time we showed you 'round the place, huh?"

Charro had begun almost before he could formulate a reply. "I guess we'll start with what you're sitting in. This is The Arena; every full moon we have a knockout right here to find the strongest 'mon. An Infernape's our current champ, actually, so I guess you could pick up some moves from her. I'll be challenging as soon as I evolve again, though," he declared, lifting his beak proudly.

"We have a flamethrower competition, too," Leo added. "Ark's still the best at that, so good that most 'mon have stopped trying to beat him. Though I'm told it's been ruining his voice, so hopefully he'll retire soon." He said the words with a tinge of longing.

Leo and Charro started showing him around the rest of the cavern. There was a wall with numerous cubby holes carved into them, which Fen was told served as a temporary supply storage for any 'mon heading out. The cubby holes were manned by a tall Pokémon that Leo told him was a Delphox. Fen had worried that not knowing a species name was treated as an unforgivable sin to Pokémon, but neither of his guides seemed to mind it.

Then, they passed an area in a mostly deserted corner, where the volcano rock had been elaborately shaped into a series of small rooms, which were only enterable from one side. "Most 'mon here are happy to sleep anywhere in the cavern," Leo explained, "but these places are for anyone who needs a bit of privacy, for whatever reason."

As Leo predicted, all kinds of Pokémon stopped Fen as they walked, slowing them to barely a Shellos-pace. Unlike Leo, they all did the Fire greeting with him, but he wasn't able to consistently repeat the

power of his flamethrower on Charro. His throat started aching from the quantity of embers breathed.

Many asked who it was he knew from Arkan, to which he told them Cyan, and a few difficult moments arose when he was pressed on who his family were. "This Quilava can't be the *only* Fire you know," another Chimchar, who he could distinguish from himself mostly by the greater effort she had put into ordering her disorderly hair, was telling him. "At least one of your parents must be, right? Or…" her face darkened, "don't tell me you were abandoned at hatching? Oh Mew, I didn't realise-"

"It's not like that," Fen said hastily. "I just… can't tell you who my parents are. That's all I can say. Sorry."

Maybe saying I was an orphan would make me look a little less suspicious? he wondered. *But I don't want the pity of everyone here, either - if that is how they'd treat a Pokémon without parents…*

From that point on, Fen had Leo to thank for skilfully deflecting away any enquiries about his 'family'.

Towards the north end of the cave, a number of bags and empty buckets scattered the floor. A couple of bird Pokémon closely resembling Charro were resting.

"In case you wondered where the food and water here came from," Leo said, "we send out a group of Flyers each day to retrieve some from down the mountains. They're out right now, though."

"I managed to get today off, otherwise I'd be out there too," Charro interjected helpfully.

Fen had another glance at the mass of bodies in the cave. "They must be carrying a lot to feed everyone."

"Oh yeah!" Leo said. "A couple of Charizard we have can carry about four bags at once. It's lucky that Flyers are more used to being in the

rain, what with the rough weather we've been having lately."

Fen slowed. *The weather.* He'd been so caught up in the heat of the volcano, the welcoming he'd gotten, his fight with Charro… it was like he'd forgotten why he was here.

But why am *I here?* he thought alarmedly. *I'm wasting time! Where's Ryu now? Did he find water okay?*

Both Leo and Charro seemed to be wondering why he'd stopped. "Sorry. Just… remembered something," Fen said, though he didn't start walking again. "You say the weather's been rough here? How so?"

"Well…" Leo frowned. "There's been a few storms that just suddenly appeared out of nowhere. We had to crowd into the corners of the cave because the rain was coming down so hard. A few 'mon seemed to think there were ground tremors the other day too, but I didn't notice them."

"Hey, I heard some rumours of earthquakes further north," Charro said. "Y'know if that's true?"

"There was one in Sanguin Town while I was there," Fen said.

Charro's wings inflated in surprise. "Huh, who would've thought? Although, I wouldn't be able to feel them even if I tried…"

"So why do you think this stuff's happening?" Fen asked. The blank looks he got back left him little option but to elaborate. "I mean, with these earthquakes, storms… this weather isn't normal for Kyunn. Aren't you a bit worried about it?"

Leo's ears lowered slightly. "Sure, it's unusual," he said slowly. "But… there's nothing we can do about it, is there? And besides, the fact that the weather isn't normal means I doubt it'll stay like this for long. I don't see any reason to worry." Charro nodded in agreement.

Fen looked to the floor, trying to suppress a scowl. *I didn't expect anything different, but still… How can they not be concerned with what's happening? Pokémon here treat nature with so much trust, like it can't do any wrong. But I… I know there's something wrong, I just* do *! Even if this doesn't make sense to anyone else, I have to believe it… I've come all this way…*

"Fen, is something wrong?" Leo asked concernedly.

Fen looked Leo in the eye. Something seemed to want to stop him saying the words he needed to, but he forced his mouth open.

"I… I need to leave."

It came out louder than he wanted. Leo and Charro stared at him, shocked into silence. He could see a few Pokémon in his periphery stop and observe him with a similar surprise.

"You're just leaving?" Charro exclaimed. "But… what're you doing here? Why'd you come so far? We're not close to any kinda towns or… y'know, other places for Fires to live! *Especially* if you came from the north! There's nothing good that's south of here!"

"I know," Fen said, sighing. He lowered his voice. "I'm looking for an Absol. I was told the most likely place to find one was on Glyciak Mountain, so that's where I'm going. Basically, I think something's wrong with the weather and natural disasters that Kyunn's been having, and I want to find out why."

Leo and Charro continued to stare at him. "Fen…" Leo looked at him worriedly. "Absol? Glyciak…?"

"D'you know how cold it is up there?" Charro squawked, eyes bulging. "I've only flown over it once, but by Entei… I thought my wings were gonna snap! And your reason for going is that something's wrong with the weather?! Are you serious?"

"I *am* serious!" Fen said impatiently. "Look, if I explained my reasons in full, not only would it be a long story that I *don't* want to tell, but I doubt you'd believe it anyway! Okay?"

Charro let out a huff, turning his beak away. "You're crazy," he muttered. "Have fun getting frozen, then." He began beating his wings to fly off.

Fen realised that he might've been too strong. "Charro, I didn't mean to offend you-"

But it was too late. In a matter of seconds, Charro had already swooped far away to another corner of the cave and was gesticulating something with his wings to those around him.

"Ignore him," Leo said. "He gets like this sometimes. The thing is, we both just assumed by how you arrived, turning up with no supplies and all, not knowing anyone, that you were staying…"

"My partner's got our supplies," Fen said quickly. "He's outside here because he isn't a Fire. But that's another reason why I need to get going."

"Uh… right." One of Leo's legs pawed at the ground. "Of course you don't have to stay… while I agree that this journey sounds pretty dangerous, I won't demand to know your personal reasons for doing it."

Fen brightened up. "I appreciate that, Leo."

Leo nodded back. "Were you going to leave now? Is there anything you need from here?" He glanced up through the volcano's gap. "The birds on shift won't be back for a while if it's food you wanted…"

Fen looked around, wanting to try and savour this place for the little time he had left. His eyes fixed upon the huge bank of rock in the centre of the room, which they'd been navigating around the entire time. "What's this place about?" he asked.

"Oh, *that* place?" Leo grinned. "You've made a good choice; if I was gonna show you one thing before you left, it would be the crater. C'mon, follow me."

Leo trotted off towards the bank, Fen close behind. *I hardly could have explained things to Charro much differently,* he thought sadly. *Maybe my tail flared again and he just got the wrong idea? Ugh…*

Leo walked around the rock until they came to a rough set of carved steps. "Here we are," he said cheerfully. He climbed up the steps, until his front legs and head were peeking over the edge of what Fen now realised wasn't just a bank of rock, but a massive circular hole. Fen scrambled up so he could do the same, then looked down.

The only word he could produce was "Wow", and it felt woefully inadequate. Only a few metres below them was pure, bubbling, blindingly orange magma. Watching it flow almost silently, thicker than any normal liquid, was mesmerising. Yet after about 30 seconds Fen got a most unusual itching sensation on his body, and it took a moment for him to realise what it was: he felt too hot. He pulled his head away slightly.

"Bet you wondered how this place was so warm?" Leo was grinning. "It's this." He too had retreated, though remained close to the crater.

"Yeah…" Fen murmured. The hotness seemed to have made his initial amazement retreat, and a more rational part of his brain was whirring. "That magma… this must be a properly active volcano," he said. "You - everyone here - you're living *inside* an active volcano. Is that safe?"

"I… don't know what you mean by active," Leo said, giving him another odd look. "But I mean, of course it's safe! 'Mon have been living here for generations - I think they'd know if something bad was going to happen. You know, uh…" he leant closer to Fen, "Ark, as he's known, comes from a long line of Arcanine apparently. The volcano wasn't named specifically after him, if that's what you thought. It's way, way older than that."

Fen briefly stuck his head back over and couldn't help marvelling again at the sight. *Maybe I am overreacting… I should trust that the Pokémon here know what they're talking about. But still… if that were to erupt, who knows what would happen…*

He finally stepped away from the pit, and Leo followed. "Thank you, Leo," he said. "I'm glad I could see this place, even if I can't stay. It's truly amazing."

He meant it, in terms of the skill involved in essentially carving out a mini town from volcanic rock, and the ingenuity of these Pokémon's food system, using the volcano's opening to their advantage. As well as being able to see the inner workings of the volcano from so close.

"Hey, don't forget the flamethrower you learned how to use!" Leo chirped back, before his face became serious. "I think we should tell Ark that there's been a misunderstanding with you here, and that you were never staying to begin with. Do you mind waiting just a little longer?"

Fen twiddled his thumbs anxiously. "No, that's okay." Leo was too nice for him to be any more impatient.

Ark was napping in a quiet corner of the volcano. Leo hesitantly nudged one of the Arcanine's huge paws with his head, to which he woke, blinking dreamily between Leo and Fen. Fen explained his situation as vaguely as he could, and fortunately, perhaps due to his tiredness, Ark didn't ask for further details.

They walked past the crater again on the way to the entrance, and Fen found quite a few Pokémon casting him bemused looks at him. *I guess I shouldn't be surprised that word travels quickly in here, for what is essentially one big house. And I can hazard a guess at who this particular word came from…*

The continued looks started to irritate him. *Ugh, they probably think I'm as crazy as Charro does. Maybe if I was just an ordinary Pokémon, with no amnesia or human memories, I* would *be as*

content living here as everyone else. But I'm not, and until I work out my emotion attacks, my old life and everything else, I can't be content at all… Not to mention I'd be leaving behind Ry-

He felt something move under him and froze. Leo had stopped too, but was only looking concernedly at him. "Did you feel something?" Fen asked quickly.

"I'm… I'm not sure," Leo replied, a little nervously.

Fen glanced around to his side that wasn't obscured by the crater. No-one seemed to have been disturbed. Had he imagined that tremor? *Surely… this place has been dormant for generations… there's no way that was anything serious…*

"I'm imagining things," he said, mostly convincing himself. "I really need to get going. Sorry that I couldn't stay longer, Leo, but maybe-"

BANG.

A sound like a shotgun went off inside his head, and the ground lurched, throwing him helplessly to the floor. He had gone deaf - or at least, all he could hear was an awful booming noise that rattled his whole body. The ground underneath him shook relentlessly.

He knew immediately what this was, but comparing the magnitude of this earthquake to the one in Sanguin Town would be like comparing his weakest embers to one of Ark's flamethrowers. He clawed desperately at the floor, looking for a grip, but the crater's bank he'd fallen against was too smooth. He felt paralysed with fear.

After what felt like hours, the tremors died down enough for his ears to pick up distant wails of despair, a sound he felt like making himself. The earthquake had sucked all the energy from him, and when he lifted his head, which itself took a great effort, he saw a terrifying symmetry with almost all the rest of the cave. Every Fire Pokémon, save for the birds which were screeching hysterically above him, was flat out on the floor, struggling to move.

Then his breath caught as another rumbling came. *Another earthquake? No… this one's different… it feels less deep, as if the source of it is coming from somewhere closer… but where could that-*

He heard a scream from above. "ERUPTIOOOOON-"

Then, the ground literally threw him; the rock floor he had laid on exploded upwards, hurling him through the air as easily as a Machoke tossing wood. He felt his head crack against a wall and then saw himself falling face first, helpless to protect himself.

A cry just escaped his mouth when it mingled with another. He felt something bite hard around his leg, and suddenly he was floating above the ground, head dangling upside down.

Looking frantically around, he saw Leo alongside him, also upside down, held up by the claws of one of the large birds he'd seen earlier. Then a voice, clearly straining, screamed in his ear.

"I can't carry you far!" It was Charro. *Charro!* "You need to get out before this whole place collapses, okay?! Don't worry about us, we'll be fine! Just get to the exit! Follow the others!"

Fen was released from the Fletchinder's wings before he could reply. Ahead, every single ground-based Fire Pokémon was running to the entrance tunnel, many already trying to cram through ahead of others. Fen had no thought other than to do the same, his body powered by an extra burst of energy he didn't know he possessed.

The floor shook a few more times on the way, but Fen knew this wasn't an ordinary earthquake. The number of Pokémon turning their heads with a look of horror made it clear that what Charro had said was right - their volcano home was falling apart.

He and Leo scrambled outside together, and when Fen finally looked behind him, it was even worse than he'd imagined. Huge chunks of rock had broken off the volcano's heights, barrelling downwards like

an avalanche. Out of the very peak, which had been clear moments before, ash was exploding outwards, rapidly turning the world around it into hazy blackness.

Leo punched him in the side, screaming something unintelligible in the din. But Fen understood the message: *run.* All he could see were two red figures moving away to the right, and they followed them. Fen couldn't tell whether it was the same path he'd travelled up, but it was *a path* - that was all that mattered.

They'd reached a narrow platform when a crack to their right made them both twist their heads around. A piece of volcano had crumbled off into a hundred rock fragments, which now tumbled in their direction. When Fen looked ahead again, Leo had already hared past him. He turned back to the rocks, and got a horrible, petrifying sense of helplessness. This rock avalanche was coming too fast, and too wide, and too high… no matter what he did in the next three or four seconds, it was going to hit him. Leo hadn't dallied, which gave the Flareon a chance to run past it, and Leo was quicker than he was.

"LEO!" Fen cried desperately. It blew heaps more ash into his mouth and made him almost double up in pain. Leo didn't seem to hear him, but Fen started running anyway. He didn't have much of a choice.

Hoping for a miracle, he closed his eyes. Really, he feared the worst.

Zephia

There was no miracle. Perhaps Fen's only piece of fortune was that none of the rocks he collided with took out his head.

Still, the impact was far too strong for him to offer any resistance. Knocked backwards, the ground beneath him disappeared. It wasn't until his dangling leg cracked against some protruding piece of cliff, making him almost spiral in the air, that his senses woke up to the fact he was in freefall.

His instincts responded faster than his mind ever could have. Extending his claws, he thrust his arms into the rock face he was falling down. They held for a split second, then broke, showering him with more dust and rock. He tried again, screaming with the effort and pain, his claws screeching down the cliff. But they held.

He managed to control his dangling legs, even his left which still ached horribly from its rock collision. Bringing them close to the cliff, he jammed those claws in place too, which felt secure enough, despite every part of him still shaking. For a while, he did nothing but hang there, not daring to even partially contract a claw. As his thudding heart eased, the realisation of what had happened began to sink in.

Over a hundred Pokémon had been inside Arkan, perhaps double that. The Fire birds would, he thought, have been able to fly to safety; though given the sheer scale of the volcano's collapse, and the ash that was bursting out, even that wasn't guaranteed.

But what of everyone else? Many of those Pokémon were younger than him, or weaker. Many did not possess the flexibility he did, which was the only reason he had managed to save himself. If it wasn't for Charro, he doubted he would have even made it out of the cavern. What had happened to Leo? Or Ark himself? They might already be dead…

He started weeping.

It was all too much. Yes, there had been earthquakes, and heavy storms prior to now. But this was too extreme. Lives had been taken. An entire society broken.

And *he* had known. That was the worst thing. He had known that something was horribly wrong, and no-one had believed him. The fact that those fears had been validated now were of no consolation. Even though he knew that others' defiance of the weather was not his fault in the slightest, he was wracked with such guilt that his arms started trembling again.

No, he thought then, determinedly. *Forget this. Right now, I need to find a way out of here. A way to not die…*

First, he loosened one claw in order to twist his head and face his surroundings. Or what *should* have been surroundings. The ash had only gotten worse since his fall. It might have been night-time, but he couldn't tell; the blackness shrouding his vision was as intense as Arkan itself.

Given how the ash had choked him when he'd shouted Leo's name, calling for help did not seem a wise option. The only other thing he could do was climb.

He released his loosened hand from the wall entirely, then quickly raised it higher into the rock. After a moment of wiggling, it held again. He did the same with his opposite foot, then his other hand, and his other foot, until he was a few inches higher up. A few inches closer to where he'd fallen.

This kind of climbing came as naturally to him as anything. But with his lack of vision, and the possibility that a chunk of rock could fall onto him at any moment, he took it slower than usual. He had no idea how long he climbed for; the all-consuming ash seemed to hold time in a bubble. Then at last, he found a platform and pulled himself up. He could see a little better here.

The platform was wide and flat, which surely made it part of the path up to Arkan's cavern - though the debris covering every ounce didn't make it much of a path anymore. Though he couldn't see where the cavern was, it had surely fallen too. The whole mountain had fallen into an eerie silence, excluding the constant whipping of ash in his ears.

He tried to formulate his next move. Though he'd tried to breathe as little ash as possible, his mouth was still as dry as a Cacnea, and his stomach didn't feel much healthier. *I need food and water, but I won't find that around here. I have to figure out where I am. But who can help me? I can't hear or see anyone…*

Then he remembered; there was someone else. Someone who *would* have stayed close-by, no matter what. Ryu had even gone *looking* for water!

"Ryu!" Fen shouted, braving his voice. There was no response, but he didn't lose hope. *I know he'll be okay; rocks don't hurt him like they do with me and other Fires. Ryu said he would stay within calling distance, but this ash seems to block out a lot of sound… maybe if I get to a higher platform, he'll hear me better…?*

Fen stepped on to a tall chunk of fallen rock and called Ryu's name twice more before the exertion gave him a coughing fit. He would have to wait before trying again. Sighing, he climbed down, and his foot suddenly stepped on something peculiar. Something… soft, and furry. His breath caught.

He could see only a pair of feet, painted grey by the dust; everything else was buried under a mountain of rubble. Pushing the debris away, his chest loosened slightly when he saw the creature had dark fur and four legs, though one was bent awkwardly inwards. It had a tuft of red between its ears. It was unconscious, but he was relieved to see its abdomen rising and falling. *Well, at least it's alive… and at least it's not Ryu…*

He looked at it again and paused. *Hold on… red tufts? Dark?* He leant in closer, so his tail flame illuminated the Pokémon more. Its limbs had red tips too, and a ruff of fur was around its neck.

He remembered the sight of this Pokémon too well to doubt who it was. But he couldn't believe it.

The Zorua… why is she here? How *is she here? Last time I saw her she disappeared without trace, so there's no way she could have been following us… hell, I'm pretty sure she never wanted to see me again…*

Suddenly, the sound of rocks grinding ahead made him look up. Someone was moving.

"Ryu?" Fen called again, then swore furiously to himself. *What am I doing?! If this is a wild Pokémon, I've just made myself an obvious target… and I'm not in any state to fight!*

But it wasn't a wild. A pair of eyes appeared, and Fen was sure it was the most comforting shade of red he would ever see. Ryu stood in front of him, so coated in ash that his face was the only part of him that had a colour. Their bag of supplies was on his shoulders as always.

Fen instantly hugged him, so strongly that they almost fell over. He couldn't even mind that Ryu seemed reluctant to return it, or that the Riolu's fur was strangely damp, which stung his own.

Ryu gave it a few seconds before saying quietly, "Yeah, don't wanna ruin our big reunion here, but uh… you're gonna hurt yourself, Fen." He stepped away carefully.

Fen tried to shake himself dry, but doing so caused more ash to stick to his fur, giving him and Ryu almost equal appearances. "I should've added, 'don't shake yourself'," Ryu said.

"Thanks." Fen did as Ryu advised. "So… why are you so wet?"

"Well, I found a-" Ryu paused, and grinned at him. "That's the first thing you say to me? Not 'I'm so glad to see you', or something?"

Fen crossed his arms. "Of course I am… I hoped the hug would've implied that. One of those things that doesn't require words."

"Yeah, I'm joshing ya," Ryu said with a smirk. "While the air was still clear, I managed to find a pond between Arkan and Smouldered Pass, which is where I set up shelter. And when I said I was gonna cool down… that's exactly what I was doing, in the pond. I had to take cover as soon as this place blew its top, and then the ash covered everything, and I couldn't dry myself very well, which is why I look like this."

Ryu stopped smiling abruptly. "I've… been looking for you all over, Fen. I called your name plenty of times but heard nothing back, then I managed to run into a few other 'mon who looked to be trying to flee, but they pushed me away before I could even ask if they'd seen you… I had no idea where you were, and… I was really, really worried I wasn't gonna find you at all."

"I was worried too," Fen said, though he nearly choked on the last word. "Sorry. Do you have water? My throat…"

"Oh! 'Course, 'course. I've been coughing loads as well." Ryu chucked their flask over to him. "I got water, but I haven't been able to find any food. I'm hoping there'll be more in this Pass place, because I'd say that we only have enough until tomorrow."

Fen gulped half of the flask's contents down in one; after having a throat full of ash, the lukewarm liquid was the best thing he'd ever tasted.

He quickly filled Ryu in on what had happened since they'd parted, though he faltered a little when explaining Arkan's collapse and his subsequent fall down the mountain. Ryu himself looked a little startled to hear his situation.

"You sure fell a long way," he said. "This is nowhere near where we parted. It's no wonder you didn't hear me calling for you."

Fen was surprised; he hadn't been able to tell the difference with the volcano in such ruins. "But you managed to hear me this far away?"

"Luckily, I was fairly close by already," Ryu said, shrugging. "And your tail helped a lot when I was nearer." He looked around. "We should get to the shelter. It's not safe out here."

Despite their position not being one of any immediate danger, Fen had the same sensation. "Before we do that, Ryu," he said, glancing next to him, "I need your help with something."

Ryu followed his gaze, and when he saw the unconscious Zorua his jaw dropped in shock. He struggled to form words at first. "What… the Dark at the river… that's *her*, isn't it? But… how… she just disappeared…"

"I found her like this, just before you arrived," Fen said. "I don't know how she got here. Look, are you still strong enough to carry her? I'm not sure how bad her injuries are."

Ryu hesitated. "What're you talking about?" he asked sharply.

Fen blinked at him. "Can you carry her? She's unconscious."

Ryu gave him a confused look. "Are you saying… you want to rescue her now?"

"Yes."

"Aap?!" Ryu gave an astonished yelp. "Are you crazy, Fen? She wanted to hurt us last time we saw her! She tried to *kill* you!"

"But she might die here if we don't do something!" Fen hit back. "Look at her! She's hardly going to hurt us like this, is she?"

"No." Ryu frowned. "But what she did back then…"

"What she did doesn't make her evil," Fen said firmly. "I don't forgive her exactly, but I understand… *partially*, why she acted like she did." Realising something, he asked Ryu, "You *did* hear what she said after I stunned her, right? Before I gave you the oran berry?"

"Uh…" Ryu screwed his face up. "I… I wasn't really concentrating then, no."

Fen heartbeat quickened again. *What's Ryu going to think about me once he hears the Zorua's story? He barely knows anything about humans… Would he still trust me? Should I even still… no, I'm not backing down from this!*

"We can talk about this later," he said. "Again, can you carry her?"

"If we take her to the shelter, what'll we do then?" Ryu pressed. "She's gonna wake up at some point."

Now Fen hesitated. He wanted the Zorua's help, but given Ryu's opinion of her, he feared how his friend would react to that plan.

"We can decide that once we get there," Fen said slowly. "You don't think she'll wake up before then, do you?"

Ryu took a closer look at the Zorua, wincing when he saw her leg. "Sheesh…" he muttered. "I did think it'd take something big to knock *her* out, but still… she might be out a long time." He glanced at Fen. "Fine, I'll carry her there. Take my bag 'case we need something, though."

He passed the bag to Fen, hauled the Zorua over his shoulder, and led them off.

Their walk in the darkness proceeded largely in silence. Fen was content to focus on walking, and not only because he was relying Ryu's directions. Despite resting, his legs still felt like they'd been

exchanged with lead, and he was willing for them not to buckle under him before they reached shelter.

He almost walked into Ryu's tail when the Riolu stopped suddenly, glancing around.

"Are we here?" Fen asked.

"No. Thought I heard something…"

Fen twitched his ears, listening for anything other than howling ash… then he heard it too. A harsh kind of scream… it was moving towards them…

"YAAAHH!"

Ryu jumped backwards into him, the combined weight of him and the Zorua knocking them all to the floor. Fen scrambled out and got a glimpse of the figure ahead; he couldn't remember a name, but its glowing purple eyes, translucent form and the way it terrified Ryu made its identity unmistakable…

A Ghost.

Fen forced himself up and tried breathing fire at the floating, doll-like figure, but only a wisp of smoke came out. He froze. *All those greetings I exchanged with Arkan's Pokémon, they must have exhausted my inner fire… oh, Mew! That's my only attack that can hurt these things! What do I do?! I'm as bad as Ryu right now, and we don't have Savi this time!*

He quickly turned away as the Ghost's eyes landed upon him, wary of it trying to confuse him, and felt something swing on his back as he moved. *The bag… that's it!*

He yanked their bag open and scrabbled around until he found the seed pouch, which he pulled a random seed from. It was white, with

red tips around the edges. The Ghost was still hovering menacingly, as if taunting him to try and attack.

What does this one do again? Uh… I think Scout said you were meant to eat the red ones, not throw them… so then…

He stood up to face the Ghost, whose yellow mouth grinned back at him, and bit into the seed. At once, a blaze of red-and-white heat - it certainly wasn't fire - burst from his mouth, searing the Ghost's entire body. It disappeared instantly in a puff of smoke.

Fen blinked for a few seconds, then painfully ran his tongue around his mouth. It was scalded all over. He tried to check the seed he'd used, but it had disintegrated the moment he'd bitten it. *That… must have been the blast seed, I guess. Whatever kind of artificial fire that was, it did the trick… and it's better that* I *bit into it than a non-Fire like Ryu…*

He checked that no more Ghosts were forthcoming, then bent down to where a shivering Ryu still held the Zorua. "They're gone," Fen said.

Ryu nodded, his eyes watery. "I'm sorry… we're nearly there now… I just…"

"Don't worry about it," Fen said immediately, helping Ryu to his feet before the 'mon picked up the Zorua again.

Fen *was* worried though, if the ash - he couldn't imagine it being anything else - was driving Ghosts to this area. *I can't fight everything on my own, but if Ryu's still as petrified of Ghosts as before I won't have a choice! We only have two seeds and a handful of berries left now, and there's still a whole icy mountain to climb past here… can we really do this?*

Ryu looked around continuously from that point on, jumping several times at seemingly nothing. It was to Fen's enormous relief when, a few minutes later, they hopped off a small ledge and found

themselves facing an expertly hollowed-out piece of mountain. The size made it practically a small cave.

Ryu dumped the Zorua down at the far end, then grabbed some big rocks piled up around the outside of the cave and barricaded them halfway up against the opening.

"You can't see it now, but the pond's right next to here, so I'd be careful if you decide to go walkabouts," Ryu explained. The safety procedures seemed to have calmed him significantly.

"Thanks," Fen said, sitting opposite him. "You're like a Noctowl, being able to navigate all these places in the dark…"

Ryu chuckled shortly. "Put that down to a million nights of getting home too late." He looked over at the Zorua, who was dimly lit in Fen's tail, and his smile faded.

"How's she looking now?" Fen asked.

Ryu shrugged. "The same? I'm no Chansey… all I know is that with that leg, she won't be moving for a while.

"What about if we gave her an oran berry? How fast do you think she'd recover?"

Ryu looked at him questioningly. "Are you suggesting that? We have two orans left, and to fix her leg we'd probably be using a whole one. Then… *maybe* she'd be walking by tomorrow? But look, what I suggested earlier about leaving her might have been harsh… I don't want to see any 'mon die, but she's not *going* to die if we don't heal her! I don't see why we should-"

"I think she can help us," Fen said. At Ryu's stunned expression, he added, "She already has, in making me remember that I came from Hoenn."

Ryu's eyes widened. "What? You remembered where you're from? Why didn't you say anything?"

Fen sighed. "The fact that I was from Hoenn was all I *could* remember," he said. "I don't know if the Zorua will be willing to say much more about the region, but if she does, it might fix more of my memories." He paused. "You've not heard of Hoenn, I take it?"

Ryu considered for a second. "No. So… what exactly did she say after you stunned her, other than where she was from? Did you find out why she was after you?"

A feeling of dread rose in Fen's stomach. He would have to tell Ryu the story the Zorua had given him. *I'd rather tell Ryu myself than have her do it, but I can't lie about any of the details. She might shout about it from the moment she sees us…*

So Fen relayed the Zorua's story as accurately as he could remember; from her being captured, to escaping Hoenn, up to how she'd heard him and Ryu mentioning humans in Sanguin Town. Then he added the rest of the details from their exchange at the river.

"Look, Ryu," Fen added once finished, "please don't think I'm someone different, someone *bad* because of this. The Zorua doesn't believe it, but I swear that not all humans are like the ones that hurt her. While I don't remember who I was as a human, I hope you can see… I would never hurt any Pokémon like that. It torments me enough just to know that I *could* have been one of those people… I can't imagine doing those things…" he trailed off, unsure what else to say, and glanced hopefully at Ryu.

Ryu sat quietly for a while. "Zorua's really not gonna be happy when she wakes up and sees you," he murmured, frowning.

"Well, no, obviously-" Fen paused, and looked at him incredulously. "What?! What about what I just said? Doesn't it bother you at all? I… I could have been someone terrible…"

"Hmm. *That* bothers me, because you're not making sense," Ryu said with a wry smile. "So, you said that you'd never hurt a Pokémon in the way Zorua was. And I believe you, I know you wouldn't lie about that. Yet, you think you might have previously been someone who *would* hurt a 'mon like that. Now, when you met me for the first time, there were loads of things you could've done, but didn't. Like when I wasn't sure about you coming with me; maybe then you could've grabbed my bag and *demanded* that I escort you to Sanguin Town, or else you'd… steal all my stuff, right?"

Fen's eyes narrowed. "There's no way I would've done that."

"Exactly!" Ryu exclaimed. "What does that mean? It means… you had some kinda *character* ! And that character can't have just come out of nowhere, given you had it then, before you knew *anything* about yourself. You're not, like, a totally new 'mon, are you? I mean, I suppose you kinda are, but y'know - it would make sense if how you feel about these things now are how you've always felt, don't you think?

Fen hesitated. "You might be right. But even then, my character might have changed through some other means. I can't *really* be sure of anything about myself. That's the problem."

"Well, I get that," Ryu acknowledged. "But to be honest, even if you *were* this horrible human in the past, it doesn't bother me because I know you're not like that now. I trust that you're a good 'mon, Fen. Or a good human. Whatever. I don't think you should worry about it."

He looked up at Fen expectantly, and in the end, Fen had to give in. He knew Ryu was right about one thing; if a good time to debate his past ever existed, it certainly wasn't now.

"I'll take your word for it, then," he said, smiling. "Thank you."

Ryu just shrugged, but he seemed happy.

"What were you saying about Zorua, then?" Fen asked. They seemed to have named her so through unspoken agreement.

Ryu turned serious again. "Right. Even if she can't attack us when her leg's so bad, I can't see her being willing to help you. I mean, we have given her shelter here, but… I don't know how grateful she'll be for that. From what you said, she really hates you, no matter how much you deny being…"

He made a gesture that said, ' *you know what I mean'.* But before Fen could reply, a flash of turquoise to his left startled him, and Ryu too. Zorua's eyes were opening.

They both watched, frozen, as she mumbled some words Fen couldn't make out, then blinked innocently a few times, peering around the cave. Her head suddenly landed upon the source of light, and her eyes sparked into life.

"GRRAAA-" She instantly tried lunging at Fen, but stepped heavily on her fractured leg before getting near. Her howls of aggression turned to cries of pain, and she fell helplessly on her side, limbs outstretched.

"W-w-where am I…" she gasped, breathing rapidly, sounding like she was trying very hard to keep her voice steady. "W-why are you two… what are you doing to me?!" Her eyes were darting around wildly, as if looking for an escape, but Fen and Ryu were blocking the only exit.

"We found you on the volcano," Fen said, a little shakily. Even though Zorua couldn't hurt him, he still felt a slight fear of her, the same that Ryu appeared to. "You were knocked out, and your leg was… how it is now. I think you were hit by a part of the mountain as it was falling. And this is a tunnelled rock, on the volcano's outskirts. It's safe."

"I… remember the volcano…" Zorua said weakly. She looked at the two of them with a mixture of anger and confusion. "But… you two…

you can't have been following me…"

"We weren't," Fen said firmly. "Like I said, we *found you* . We're looking for a certain Pokémon, and the route there took us through this volcano. That's why we were there."

"So why have you taken me here?" she hissed. "You… you want to make me look weak, is that it? You're pathetic, human…"

"No, I'm trying to protect you, Zorua!" Fen said, raising his voice. "Okay then, why are *you* here? You disappeared the last time I saw you…"

She appeared to try and laugh, but all that came out was a weak cough. "Why I'm here is none of your concern."

Fen had suspected she would give such an answer. But, given Zorua didn't immediately snap at him again, he pressed on.

"Zorua, when you told me the place you were from, in the human language, I recognised it," Fen said. "It's Hoenn. Saying it made me remember that I lived there too, before I lost my memory and got turned into a Pokémon."

She glared resentfully at him, but didn't speak.

"You disappeared before I could ask any more," Fen continued. "But I figured you must be able to tell me a few more things, and maybe if you do I'll remember more about Hoenn, and more about myself."

"And why would I tell *you* anything?" she hissed venomously, fangs bared at him.

"Because… firstly, you can't walk until your leg recovers, and without any oran berries that might take days."

Her expression didn't waver. "Fine. I'll wait days."

Fen wasn't too surprised by that. He thought carefully about his next words. "Secondly, you told me that when you escaped the place you were being held, you tried to find your old home, and your parents, but you were completely lost and had to abandon that hope. If you still want to try, then… I think I can help you find them."

An immediate, sharp intake of breath next to Fen made him turn his head. Ryu was staring wide-eyed at him, disbelief etched on his face. *"What?"* he mouthed.

Fen quickly tried to give reassuring look in return, before turning back to Zorua. He expected her to react similarly to when he'd told her he was a human; a brief moment of surprise before a torrent of anger towards him. This time though, the anger didn't follow - in fact, she stared at him almost identically to how Ryu had. She opened her mouth a few times before managing to find the voice to say a single word. "Explain."

Fen breathed a silent sigh of relief, then continued: "If I'm able to remember more about Hoenn, and you explain what your home looked like, there's a chance that I'll know where that place is. If not, I should still be able to find out so long as we find a way to get to Hoenn. And… I figured since you were able to reach here from Hoenn once before-"

"What you're saying is almost impossible," Zorua said. Her voice, though still weak, was now as level as Fen had heard it. "I only got here by deceiving a Flyer. Let's assume I can somehow find another one to deceive; how would *you* then deceive anyone? You would have to *ask* a Flyer instead. But this 'Hoenn' is a long way across the sea - I sorely doubt you'll find one willing to fly so far, especially with the weather as extreme as it has been."

Fen felt deflated. He couldn't argue with anything she'd said. His hope was a slim one as it was… the weather only made things worse…

He paused. *She… mentioned the weather.* "You think the weather's been abnormal recently?"

"What are you, a Psyduck?" Zorua snapped. "Of course it has! Something like today was just a matter of time, what with the previous earthquake, all those storms, the weird heatwaves in between them…"

"No, I agree! That's why we're here!" Fen exclaimed. Before he knew what he was saying, he gushed, "We're looking for a Pokémon called Absol, in Darkrai's Knot which is south of here. They're supposed to sense natural disasters, so I thought that if anyone could explain what's been causing these problems, it'd be them. But… every other Pokémon we've met so far seems to think that the weather's nothing to worry about, which I couldn't understand. Everyone apart from you, that is."

Zorua looked even more stunned than before. She lowered her head and muttered, "You have to be kidding me…"

"What?" Fen asked.

She sighed, then looked at him. "I know what Absol can do. I thought I caught sight of one a few days ago running past the volcano, going towards those ice mountains in the distance. With the weather behaving as it has been, I wanted to catch up with it. That's what took me here."

She was going to Darkrai's Knot too! Amazed, a new idea was rapidly forming in Fen's mind. Though the unlikeliness of finding a way to Hoenn was disappointing, stopping the natural disasters had to be his top priority right now. And if Zorua agreed, then…

"Zorua, you still want to find this Absol, don't you?" he said. "To stop the disasters?"

"I'm not sure *why* you think they can just be stopped," she said, narrowing her eyes. "But, supposing they can, it would stop *this* from

happening." She gestured to her twisted leg. "And if you are able to help me how you believe you can, and there is a chance of finding my home again… finding a way there would become more feasible."

Fen took a deep breath. "Then there's a deal I want to propose. I'll give you one of our oran berries, and in return you'll tell me everything you can about Hoenn. Unless something pretty major happens to me because of that, Ryu and I are going to continue travelling towards Darkrai's Knot. And since…"

Ryu suddenly gave Fen a hefty nudge, putting him off.

"Uh… what is it?" he asked.

"We need to talk about this," Ryu said forcefully. "Outside."

Fen was a little taken aback by his tone. "Now?"

Yeah." He got up and shot an icy glance at Zorua. "And don't you dare try anything."

Zorua scowled back and held her good paw up in mock surrender. "Like I'm going anywhere…"

Ryu kept up the angry staring contest for a few more seconds before turning away. He climbed over their barricade and sat just outside the cave entrance.

"Fen," he said unsteadily, his paws shaking slightly, "are you about to propose what I think you are? You want to actually *team up* with Zorua? You're gonna ask her to travel with us?"

"Yes," Fen said, trying to hide his alarm at the Riolu's tone, "but there's good reasons for this-"

"NO!" Ryu suddenly exploded. "No way! What are you thinking?! Have you forgotten that she pushed you into a river? That it's only 'cause I was there that you didn't drown?!"

"Of course not!" Fen snapped back. "But you've heard her story. She was trying to protect herself-"

"Protect herself by drowning 'mon? By ripping ankles apart? That's… that's not protecting yourself, that's psycho behaviour! She fights with the intent of *hurting,* Fen, and… that's not what civilised Pokémon do! That's not okay! That's… that's…"

Ryu trailed off, but he recovered. "And she could sabotage us so easily! She could steal our food - no, steal our whole *bag* and just run off! She could… disguise herself as anything, then deceive us that way… she could even just make up whatever she's going to tell you now!"

Fen had never seen Ryu so angry with him, and his body seemed to want to retaliate in kind. It took a few difficult seconds to suppress his tail flame.

"Zorua wouldn't be my first pick of allies either," he said, forcing his voice to be calm.

"She'd be my *last* ally in the world!" Ryu cried.

"I know! But look at what's happened today. Look at where we still have to go! I've heard enough about Glyciak to work out that what lies ahead will be seriously tough, especially if these disasters get worse and, though I pray against it, more Ghosts show up."

At this, Ryu's expression sobered and he looked away.

"I know you don't want to admit it Ryu, but Zorua is strong… really, really strong. Not just at fighting, but mentally, having heard what she's gone through in her life… I'm not sure I could've done what she has. And where we're going, we'll need every ounce of strength that we can find."

"I don't *care* about how strong she is," Ryu said bitterly. "How can you trust her after what she did to you? To us?"

"Because… from what I can tell, she'd do pretty much anything to see her family again. Which includes helping us find this Absol." Still Ryu didn't look at him, and he added, "Look, I know she's not sorry for what she did, but she's all we've got. We have to stop the disasters. That's the only thing that matters."

Ryu drummed his paws against the rock for a long while, gazing distantly into the night. "I still disagree," he said eventually. "But you're better at making these decisions than me. If you truly believe this will help us stop the disasters, and help get your memories back… I can't stand in your way. I want us to succeed as much as you do, Fen… I just didn't think we'd need to go to these lengths to do it…"

"I know," Fen said. "Neither did I." He felt unexpectedly touched by Ryu's selflessness, but could think of little to respond with. "Thank you for having faith in me," he said at last. "We *will* do this."

Ryu looked at him and smiled very slightly. "We will," he echoed. "Alright, 'mon." He made a move to go back inside, then stopped himself. "Fen… there's one more thing."

"Hm?"

"If Zorua can find her way home, in this Hoenn place you talk about… isn't there a good chance that you can find your home there too?"

Fen was puzzled at the sudden subject change. "I don't know exactly how my memories work, but I hope I'll be able to remember where I lived, yeah."

Ryu lingered, and for a moment it seemed like he'd say something more, but he quickly twisted his head away. "Forget it… ignore me. Let's go inside."

Inside the cave Zorua had closed her eyes, though she narrowly opened them again at the sound of their footsteps. Seeing her from afar, it hit Fen how weak she was - she couldn't even stand up.

"Okay, Zorua," Fen said to her. "As I was saying: we'll give you an oran berry, and in return you'll tell me everything you know about Hoenn. We're going to continue travelling towards Darkrai's Knot, to find an Absol, and since you were going the same way, I think we should work together to get there. But when I say work together, I mean that we're going to *help* each other; whether it be fighting wilds, looking for food and water, or anything else. If you can do that, I'll do whatever I can to help you find your family, and your home, again. But that's unlikely to be possible until we find a way to resolve the disasters, even if I *can* remember where your home is."

He knew it was an outlandish plan, but the mere possibilities he could give Zorua seemed enough for her to consider it. "You know, human," she muttered, "before now I was hoping that I'd never see you again-"

"His name is Fen," Ryu barked angrily, sitting significantly further from her than Fen was. "Do you accept the deal or not?"

Zorua scowled at Ryu again. "Fine. We're in a complete mess here anyway. I accept your deal, *Fen* ."

Fen almost reached his arm out to her for a handshake of confirmation, but realised that would probably be pointless for someone like Zorua; more importantly, he wasn't sure if Pokémon had any concept of 'deal-handshakes' at all. "Thank you," he said simply.

Zorua spoke in the silence that followed. "Since this means we'll be together… call me Zephia from now on."

This took Fen completely by surprise. "Zephia?" he repeated.

"Yeah," she said, sounding reluctant. "'Zorua' was what the scum called me. Even if they say the word differently to you, I still recognise it… and I can't stand it anymore. Zephia is the only other name I have, and you're gonna have to call me *something*, so… there."

Fen nodded slowly. "Zephia. Okay. So, the first part of our deal?"

Zephia gave a grunt of agreement.

"Ryu… the berry?" Fen said quietly to him. Ryu laboured to take out their oran berry, then chucked it to Fen instead of Zephia. Fen held it for a moment, debating whether to wait until Zephia told him what she knew; then he saw her leg again, how she was unable to move in pain, and couldn't bear the sight any longer. She started ripping into the berry as soon as he passed it over.

"I want you to describe the place you lived in, as accurately as you can," Fen said. "And any names if you know them, please."

He had to wait for Zephia to finish eating - not even she could hide her obvious pleasure at the berry's healing effects. When she'd licked her paws thoroughly, she tested her bad leg, which already looked a much healthier shape. However, she winced again as she put pressure on it, so instead sat awkwardly on her hind legs. It gave Fen a strange reassurance that she wouldn't somehow attack right then and escape.

"The little cove we lived in, I only knew as 'home', obviously. But the cave as a whole… while my parents didn't name it, we lived just at the edge of a river which ran into a huge waterfall, running right through the centre of the cave. So, when I was a kid I just called it Waterfall Cave."

She paused and looked at Fen, who had a moment of frustrating thinking before giving up. "That doesn't ring any bells," he said. Zephia looked oddly at him, to which he added, "I mean, I'm not remembering anything. I probably knew it under a different name."

"If you want a human name, I can't give you any," Zephia said. "Although… there were occasionally some of *them* in the main part of the cave, where most 'mon tended to live, too. They usually carried some weird equipment, and they were… hm. I really have no idea what they were using it for. My parents always told me to stay away from them, so whenever they showed up I would look for cover. Our own home was very well hidden, too. No one ever found us there, 'mon or human."

"What did the main part of the cave look like?" Fen asked. "Other than there being a waterfall."

"That was the most striking part of it," Zephia said. "I… remember the rocks having a yellowy colour, which isn't like anything I've seen here, and ground had a few big circular pits in it. The rock colour and the water gave the cave an odd kind of glow at night. Oh, some daylight came in through the top of the cave, which was open, but where we lived was shielded enough to block most of it out. I only explored at night, anyway."

Fen paused again. He was trying to visualise the description in his head, and it what she described certainly *sounded* familiar, *sounded* like somewhere he'd been before, or at least had knowledge of… but it was like a mental jigsaw that needed a vital piece. He replayed her words. *She only explored at night…?* "Does that mean you're nocturnal?"

Zephia grimaced. "I… was. But being taken to that… *place*, they only turned the lights off at night, so it fucked my sleep cycle pretty badly. I'm basically the same as you daytime 'mon now."

Fen nodded grimly. *Her past seems to get worse the more I hear…*

"Is there anything else you could say about the cave?" he asked. "I… haven't remembered anything yet…"

She looked at the floor, evidently as disappointed as him. "I'm not sure what else there is. I could give you all the species of 'mon that I

knew lived there, if you like."

She then reeled off a surprisingly long list, all of which Fen recognised in some capacity, but at the end of it he was still as uncertain as before.

"What about… what happened after you were captured?" he asked, somewhat hesitantly. "Wait! You heard those humans saying the word Hoenn, right? Were there any other words like that you picked up? They must have mentioned the towns in and around where you were located."

The sorrowful look Zephia gave at this made him flinch. "The thing is… I remember very little of what they were saying," she said. "I was trying to block them out as much as I could… I concentrated all my efforts on thinking of how I would escape, imagining seeing-" She broke off and shook herself, as if disposing of the thought. "This word 'Hoenn' just happened to stick with me."

"And… after you escaped there?" Fen asked, a little desperately. "What were those places like?"

"I wasn't admiring my surroundings… I suppose I ran and slept in mostly grasslands until I found that Pidgeot to fly with. I was on the coast too, which limited where I could run." She screwed her face up. "That's all I've got."

Fen rubbed his face with his hands. "Alright. Let's give this a rest for today."

"You still can't remember?" Zephia said.

"Mhm." Fen tried not to make his disappointment too obvious, but it was difficult.

I was so convinced Zephia would make me remember more, but it now seems like she can't… and I doubt any Pokémon besides her on Kyunn will even know a thing about Hoenn. Would I only

remember anything *if I went back to Hoenn myself? How am I ever going to do that?*

For now, I have to focus on the disasters. But even with Zephia's help, we're clinging to such a thin hope… that in the mountain that everyone's warned us about, we'll somehow find an Absol, and it'll know why the disasters are happening, and we'll be able to stop them… It's no wonder Ryu sounded so down about things…

Zephia cleared her throat across from him, making him look up.

"What's your plan once morning arrives?" she asked.

"Oh, just that if your leg's good enough, we can start moving towards Darkrai's Knot again."

"You still know where we're going?" Her tone suggested that she had little idea.

"Yeah, we have a map," Fen said. Feeling the need to demonstrate, he retrieved and unfurled it from their bag. He focused first on the distinctive black illustration of Arkan, then traced their path south to the smoky forest below it. In fact, the forest was the last major drawing between them and the ice mountain depicting Glyciak. It lit a wisp of hope inside him. *Maybe we're not so far away…*

He laid the map opposite so Zephia could see. "Here. Our next point is called Smouldered Pass, which looks to be forest-y. If we can't make it out in this ash, we've still got a compass to guide us south." He put that down too.

Zephia gazed curiously over the two objects. "Hmm," she murmured, in a tone that Fen thought to be something close to approval. She pushed the map and compass back to him. "What else is in your bag?"

"Not much right now," Fen admitted. He emptied out the rest of its contents. "A few healing berries, a couple of useful seeds… water,

some food… and this." He gestured to the fur coat. "Helps keep me dry when it rains."

Zephia eyed the coat carefully, but didn't say anything.

Once the items had been packed away again, Zephia laid on her side with her injured leg stretched out and closed her eyes. Then a moment later, she reopened them.

"Just to be clear, because I know what *you're* thinking," she began irritably, looking heavily at Ryu, who was still watching her with a distrustful look. "There is no good reason for me to, say, attack you both and run out of here right now. I'm not going to suddenly become friends with either of you, but I will work with you, because Fen here seems to know - or at least used to know - a few things that matter to me. That's it. Now stop *staring* at me, both of you." She flopped her head down again without waiting for a response.

Fen did as she asked, but found himself meeting Ryu's gaze instead. "Goodnight then, 'mon," Ryu said quietly, before curling up and closing his eyes too.

Fen was glad Ryu that hadn't waited for him to get ready to sleep, because a big part of him had no desire to. The fear of sleep had been eating away at his mind ever since the earthquake, and he hadn't had the heart to inform the others of his worries.

My emotion attacks always occur the night following a disaster, and I haven't slept since this one happened. If I try sleeping now, I'm almost certainly going to have another attack. But I don't want that to happen again! After last time, I'm not sure I can bear another one…

Staying awake wasn't doing his head any favours either. He couldn't stop turning over the descriptions Zephia had given him in his head, with the chance that he might be missing an obvious link somewhere that would help him remember. Predictably, his efforts amounted to nothing.

He then thought about the decision to team up with Zephia. How much help would she really be willing to give? Would she and Ryu even be able to bear each other's company; and if not, would her presence only end up slowing them down? Had he done the right thing?

Enough, he thought wearily. He curled himself up and sat watching his tail flame reflect against the cave walls, the dancing shadows putting his exhausted mind in a trance. It was with that image that his eyelids finally, unconsciously, drooped shut.

Wilds

When Fen woke, the first thing he noticed was Zephia, still sitting on her hind legs, licking berry juice off a paw. He was relieved to see that her and Ryu were at least cooperating on a basic level.

As he stretched against a wall, feeling unusually well rested, Ryu emerged from the cave entrance with his water flask. "Morning," he said gruffly. He sat opposite Fen and slung their bag off his shoulders, reaching in to pass him a berry. "The fog's cleared a little since yesterday, enough to see ahead of us at least, so I think we're good to move towards Smouldered Pass once you're ready." He glanced back outside. "I say 'morning', but the sun looks more like midday… I don't know when exactly we got to sleep last night, but it must've been a pretty long one."

"Yeah… must've been," Fen repeated slowly. "I… I didn't wake up in the night, did I?"

"Hm?" Ryu and Zephia made the same noise, and both shot a very quick, irritated glance at each other. "Not that I remember," Ryu said. "Why?"

"Yesterday was the night following a disaster, which is always the time I have an emotion attack," Fen said. "I fully expected to have one, but I didn't… that's strange…"

"Huh… hey, maybe it means you'll stop having them now!" Ryu smiled. "That'd be really good, right?"

Fen found it hard not to smile himself at Ryu's optimism. It would be a great relief were the Riolu correct, given how awful his previous attacks had been. *But still… I wonder why it didn't happen. It's not like I wanted an attack, but they've been one of the main indicators to me that this weather is more than merely unusual… though the earthquake yesterday probably put that beyond doubt.*

Fen noticed that Zephia was looking questioningly at him. He realised that she had no idea what attacks he meant. "They're… like this outpouring of frightened emotions I've been getting some nights," he said. "Hard to explain."

Zephia's eyes narrowed. "Right… When you're finished eating, can we get moving?"

Fen nodded apologetically and focused on his berry. He didn't expect much sympathy from Zephia. "How's your leg?" he asked between bites.

"A little sore," Zephia said, shaking it a little, "but strong enough to walk on. Should heal more as the day goes on."

"Alright." When Fen had finished, he and Ryu exchanged a silent nod like they so often seemed to, and the latter led them out into the mist.

As they didn't find Smouldered Pass until late that evening, they decided to camp just outside the forest before making a start the following day. Much of their journey there was spent climbing upwards, so by the time they reached the Pass's entrance, the little warmth given off by Arkan had completely disappeared and a chill had crept into the air. The dark volcanic ash still lingered around them, which made Fen somewhat understand the reasons behind the forest's "Smouldered" name. Though the contrast in temperature with Arkan made it a little misleading too.

The mountains seemed deserted of Pokémon, and those they did run into either attacked them immediately or fled. Fen was struggling to tell which Pokémon were civilised and which were wild. Arkan's eruption seemed to have hit the mountains like a fever.

He'd found early in the day that his fire-breathing abilities were still lacking, so on Ryu's advice he ate one of their previously useless

leppa berries, which helped immensely. The increased stomach-heat helped warm him in the cold, too.

When they entered the Pass the next morning, the first thing he noticed was, although the trees around were the tallest he'd ever seen, they were unusually light on branches. And in keeping with the coldness, the branches he did find bore very few leaves. Fen noticed Ryu's eyes darting around from the moment they arrived; his foraging instincts were always active, especially since they had now completely run out of 'normal', non-healing food. Fen would've expected Zephia to act the same, given how long she had been travelling alone, but for now she focused only on where they walked. The Pass had no clear footpaths marked, so they were relying on the compass to show the way.

As they stepped over the hard, pebbly floor, Zephia suddenly stopped mid-walk and lifted her snout upwards, sniffing. "Someone's ahead," she muttered.

"What? How d'you know?" Ryu said immediately.

Zephia simply pointed to her muzzle instead of speaking. "They're about 100 feet away. We should change direction."

"We can't just *change direction*," Ryu objected. "In case you forgot, we're actually *going* somewhere, not just strolling wherever we like."

"That's not my point," Zephia growled. "We won't go anywhere if we all get beaten to near death."

"And why would that happen?"

As they argued, Fen's ears were pricked up listening for any indicator of a Pokémon nearby. "I… can't hear anything," he said to Zephia.

" *So*, we shouldn't have a problem with moving forwards," Ryu said pointedly, already walking again.

"I can *smell* them!" Zephia hissed, hurrying after him. "Turn around! We're in danger."

"You're not leading us," Ryu replied stubbornly. "We don't have to-"

A low, rasping cry from ahead silenced him. For a moment, all they could see in the mist was a vague red shape. But then an open mouth the size of Ryu burst out of the mist, lunging at the Riolu, who just managed to duck under its pair of fangs.

As Ryu scrambled backwards in line with Fen and Zephia, the Pokémon slithered into view. It was twice Fen's height, and that was despite its black-and-yellow scales being scrunched up behind its head to make it smaller. Its dagger-shaped tail swung behind its body, tipped with the same crimson that adorned the fangs hanging from the top of its mouth.

The Seviper glared fiercely at them and hissed another cry. Fen tried to move, but its glare seemed to have glued his and the others' feet to the floor.

Ryu was the first to shake off the paralysis, and he dashed straight towards the Seviper, fists already glowing. The front of the Seviper's body suddenly twisted around, enabling its tail to whip in Ryu's direction. Ryu only just jumped high enough to evade it, but the tail swung back in reverse after missing, striking him in mid-air with its tip and throwing him into the ground.

Fen cursed him as he ran forwards. *What's Ryu playing at? We can't just blindly attack this thing without a strategy! I'll have to back him up now…*

The Seviper's head stretched over Ryu as if to bite him, but Fen broke off its action by firing a flamethrower at its face - with so much body to aim at, he figured that area would hurt it the most. The Seviper snarled and whipped its tail at him. Fen dodged it once, but this time the Seviper didn't swing again - its attention switched back to Ryu as he looked to be powering up another force palm. The

Seviper swung its tail yet again, blocking Ryu's fist with its red tip. Sparks and a purple substance flew off, and Ryu howled at the impact. Then before Fen could prepare an attack, a flash of grey moved up the Seviper's body and it suddenly jerked itself backwards. Somehow, Zephia had avoided the tail by leaping onto the back of its head.

The Seviper screeched so shrilly that Fen and Ryu were both forced to stop and cover their ears in defence. That distraction made them unprepared for when it flailed like a Magikarp out of water, its uncoiled body crashing into them both. When Fen had got himself out of a heap, he saw that, despite the Seviper's best efforts, Zephia was still clinging onto a point of its head with her front claws. When the Seviper momentarily stopped shaking she bit down hard on its scales, and a second, even angrier bout of flailing followed, which finally threw her off. With a new burst of energy, the Seviper wrapped its tail-end around the Zorua while she was down. She struggled and tried to bite it again, but its grip made her completely immobile.

"Ryu!" Fen ran over to him. "Attack the tail - that's its biggest weapon and it can't keep hold of Zephia without it."

Ryu, having already felt the tail's force twice, was slower in getting back to his feet. "It's pretty thin, so I'd hit it with something physical," he said.

He's right! Fen realised with alarm. His body had automatically been preparing for another flamethrower, but his first one had only really distracted the Seviper, and Zephia's bite had caused it far more pain. *But if all I can do is scratch it, that might not be powerful enough to free Zephia and take it down! If only I had a better technique…*

The Seviper's tail was low to ground as it continued to squeeze Zephia. Still running, Fen leapt onto the tail then immediately scrambled to retain a grip on its slippery surface. The fire in his stomach suddenly flared up, particularly in his hands and feet. He only managed to manoeuvre his left arm free, but as he lifted it to scratch, its overwhelming heat distracted him.

The following moments were the first time in many days that his instincts seemed to completely take over his body - which was just as well, because he wouldn't have worked out what to do consciously. Balling his free hand into a fist, he concentrated all his inner fire into that one, tiny area. Though every part of him hurt with the effort, he didn't let up; at first his fist glowed red, sparks flying off it, then a moment later it was engulfed in flames.

He slammed the fist down into the Seviper's tail, the hissing of fire and the creature's subsequent screeches of pain deafening him. From behind him, Ryu's fist hit the other side of its tail at the same time, bending it an uncomfortable direction. Out of the corner of his eye, Fen then saw Zephia jump out of the Seviper's weakened grip and start slashing savagely into its uncoiled body. Its tail dropped to the ground, Fen sliding off with it, but then Ryu picked up the limp tail by the hilt of its dagger shape and started swinging it into the Seviper's own body, purple liquid flying off the tail with each hit.

Fen stepped back for a moment. It was clear that the Seviper was fighting a losing battle now, yet even as it weakened it continued to squirm and utter weak cries of pain. But Ryu stopped fighting next and, to Fen's alarm, barely staggered over to him before falling in a heap. He was covered in the Seviper's purple liquid.

"Fen… the lum…" he murmured, and Fen instantly knew what had happened. He opened the bag, still on Ryu's shoulders, pulled out their one remaining lum berry and gave it to Ryu, who started taking grateful, if quite feeble, bites. His own arm had been itching strangely since his fire punch, but it disappeared after he shook it a little.

An earth-moving *crash* signalled the Seviper's head hitting the floor. Zephia seemed to have knocked it completely unconscious. Fen expected her to run towards them, but instead she walked slowly around the Seviper's body, examining it very closely.

"Zephia?" he called uncertainly. "What are you-"

She shot him with a silent look that told him very clearly to *shut up.* She sniffed the air again. "Something's coming," she said, just loud enough for Fen to hear. "We need to move!"

But… we can't! Fen tried to communicate, gesturing furiously at Ryu. He was barely conscious, and Fen doubted that he or Zephia would be strong enough to carry him away. He dowsed Ryu in water in a hasty attempt to speed up his healing, but moments later another cry broke out ahead of him and a new Pokémon appeared.

This 'mon's body was mostly comprised of a giant, spiny neck, which joined to its head and four small legs. Two similarly skeletal arms grew from where its ears should have been and these, along with its tail, were twin-clawed at the ends. It was perhaps the ugliest creature Fen had ever seen.

Tail arched high over its body, the Drapion skittered over the fallen Seviper towards Zephia, who scampered back closer to Fen and Ryu. While Fen was still thinking about how to attack, something jumped into him from the side, knocking him away. A lighter-coloured mini-Drapion had appeared, and it jabbed him a couple of times with its stingers before Fen managed to beat them away, retaliating with a flamethrower. But then another Skorupi jabbed at his side, and before he could turn his attention to this one, a pair of pincers wrapped around his torso, plucking him easily into the air. He was in the Drapion's grip.

That was a distraction! he thought ruefully. *What do I do now?* He tried wriggling to free himself, but it made angry sparks flash on the pincers holding him. They closed even tighter, immobilising him, then he was blinded by a flash of yellow. A wave of electricity hit him, far stronger than any he'd felt before. His limbs felt like they were being wrenched off his body, and they quickly went limp.

He tried to scream for help; instead of words, what came out was only his high-pitched squeal of a cry. Then the claws holding him jolted, loosening very slightly. He couldn't see what was happening, but it gave him a tiny amount of room to manoeuvre. The problem

was that his neck-downwards remained paralysed; only his head was unscathed from the claws' electricity.

The claws themselves were too thick to bite through. He twisted his head and saw a spherical hand that they connected to. He tried biting down on that, but it wasn't enough, barely making a dent. Then his shortness of energy, just like against the Seviper, seemed to inspire his brain into thinking outside his normal limits. There *was* a way he could create a greater energy to his bites, even if he hadn't tried it before… and once again, his instincts took over.

He focused on breathing fire, drawing what heat he could manage into his throat. Then where he would normally breathe out, he opened his mouth and immediately clamped onto the Drapion's hand again, with the fire surging out onto it. The taste of its burning scales almost made him gag, and the effort drained his energy alarmingly fast, but he held on and after a few seconds heard a cry from above. The claws snapped apart, dropping him to the ground on his stomach.

The pent-up fire in his body extinguished just as abruptly as his fall. Fen could hardly move; after everything he'd done to free himself, using energy he didn't know he had, there was nothing left to give. The Drapion, however, had already recovered and stood over him, pincers snapping eagerly. Fen looked around his field of vision desperately. *Ryu? Zephia?*

Hearing a grunt from behind, he turned his head just in time to see Ryu hurl a blue seed over him towards the Drapion's body.

But in his still-poisoned state, Ryu's throw was weak, and the Drapion had seen what he was trying. The creature had time to lift up a pair of pincers, catch the sleep seed in mid-air and immediately toss it out of sight. The seed broke with a faint crack, and the Drapion remained very much awake.

Fen's heart, having leapt when seeing Ryu's plan, now sunk even lower. Their best chance of winning the fight was surely gone. He

desperately tried to think… they still had an oran berry, if Ryu could just fish it out… maybe then they'd be able to run away… but what *then* ? If the whole forest was swarming with these Pokémon, they didn't stand a chance of getting through… was their only option to abandon the whole journey? Or die otherwise?

"HIIISSSSAAACC!"

Fen's head shot up. Out of nowhere, a new Seviper was standing in front of him, only this one was confronting the Drapion instead.

The two vast Pokémon had a silent standoff for a few seconds, the Seviper extending its coiled-up body to tower over the purple 'mon. The Drapion eventually backed off, and after a few more tense moments skittered away into the mist. Triumphant, the Seviper turned its head to face Fen and Ryu. At least, Fen *expected* it to look triumphant, having apparently seen off the Drapion's fight for them. It instead looked strangely expressionless; Fen couldn't put his finger on exactly why.

"Please, don't hurt us…" Ryu gasped behind him, holding out the few berries left from their bag. "Take our food… nothing else in this bag is of value…"

The Seviper continued staring for a moment, then its mouth opened. It appeared to be missing a tongue. "This is convincing, then," said Zephia's voice. "Good to know."

Stunned, Fen shook his head. Now there was no Seviper, only the familiar Zorua standing where it had been. She walked around to address both him and Ryu, and her face filled with rage.

"Listen, both of you. I'm not sure how you've made it so far while being so clueless, but if you value your lives, you're going to listen to *me* from now on. Understood?"

Before Fen could reply, Ryu made a cry of anguish.

"What's going on?!" he said, staring wide-eyed at Zephia. "Where'd that Seviper go? Where did it even come from? How did you-"

" *Shut! Up!"* Zephia hissed at him. " *I'm* the Seviper, and I just saved both of your hides after *you* walked us straight into the danger! Looks really clever now, doesn't it? We've fought two 'mon so far today - *two* - and what happens? We almost get completely knocked out, no doubt losing everything in that bag of yours, which would give us no idea of direction, and probably end all hopes of ever finding an Absol. Is that what you were going for, you floppy-eared cretin?

"Hey, we get it!" Fen cried, putting his hands protectively over Ryu. "The Pokémon here are really dangerous, stronger than any of us individually. We won't be so reckless from now on. Right, Ryu?"

Ryu still looked confused. "Hold on… did you do an illusion of a Seviper to scare that 'mon away?"

"Obviously," Zephia snapped. She glanced at Fen. "Yes, we can't fight them. That's why you two are going to be as quiet as possible, and actually pay attention to me when I sniff a 'mon close-by. Avoiding them *may* slow our route down," she shot a look at Ryu, "but it's necessary."

"And we won't get lost as long as we still have the compass," Fen added, sitting up.

Zephia grunted her approval. "Now, I think we were attacked in the first place because the 'mon saw that we're hatches, and assumed that we'd be easy pickings for them…"

Fen got an uncomfortable reminder of what Faoz had said about some Pokémon hunting others in the southmost areas of Kyunn. "You… don't mean that we're prey to them? I thought only a few types of Pokémon were eaten, and not any of us…"

"Not *that* kind of prey. More that they'll see our bag and predict - correctly - that there'll be food inside it. *He* had the right idea, offering

all our food," she said, nodding to Ryu. "Would've maybe saved our directions."

Fen's chest loosened, but only slightly. Even without the direct risk of death, this was a perilous place to walk. "So what? We just need to hide from these 'mon?"

"No," Zephia said. "That would slow us far too much. I'm going to use that illusion again. Scare them off."

Even though Fen knew what was about to happen, seeing Zephia's illusion process still defied belief. She closed her eyes and a grey haze shimmered over her body; Fen blinked a few times to try and see past it, but the next thing he knew Zephia had disappeared entirely and been replaced with the Seviper again. Ryu uttered a small yelp.

"This isn't *perfect*," the Seviper-Zephia said, "since I didn't see much of how this thing moved, and its mouth only opened when it was growling at us, so I can't mimic those things exactly. But I don't think any 'mon will notice."

"Plus, no-one here knows that a species like yours exists," Fen said.

"Mm."

There was a pause. "I'm guessing we should stay very close to you, then," Fen said. "Maybe just in front?"

"Yeah," Zephia said bullishly. "Just remember that this is *only* an illusion; if I either get attacked or attack something else it'll disappear."

Like I'd forget that *detail,* Fen thought, remembering how she'd confronted him while disguised as Savi.

"… And while I can't keep this image up forever, I can definitely go until nightfall," she finished.

Fen nodded again. There were a million questions he wanted to ask about her illusions, but he knew that now wasn't the time to satiate curiosities. "Let's do it then," he said, turning to Ryu. "Are you alright to walk, bud?"

Ryu groaned and hauled himself to his feet. "'Course I am…" He reached for the bag, but Fen grabbed it and pulled it decisively around his own shoulders.

"I should take this for a while," he said. "You're already tired enough." While he too felt exhausted, it was obvious that Ryu was in a worse state.

Ryu baulked at him. "I'm way stronger than you, 'mon. I'll be fine."

"Ryu, you can barely walk," Fen pointed out.

"I wear the bag all day, though," Ryu said, a touch irritably. "It doesn't weigh anything to me now."

Reluctantly, Fen handed it back over. "I thought you'd appreciate the help, is all."

"Well, I don't need help carrying things, alright?"

Fen shook his head; now wasn't the time to be petty. They got into formation in front of Zephia's illusion.

"By the way… who knew that these floppy things were my ears, huh?" Ryu muttered, pointing first to his aura-sensors then to the smaller, fixed ears on top of his head. "She could at least get her insults right. The number of 'mon that get those two things mixed up, I swear…"

Fen concluded more and more as the day went on that, despite Zephia being unable to help his memories, teaming up with her now was the best decision they could have made. With her Seviper

illusion up and her alerting them whenever she caught a strong scent, they didn't meet any wilds nearly as formidable as the first two. Most Pokémon they encountered literally ran into their path; these were predominantly normal-types (or 'Commons' as Pokémon seemed to call them), and all scattered at the sight of Zephia.

It was difficult to grasp how deep into the forest they'd travelled or how far was left to Glyciak; the only indicator Fen could use was the gradually falling temperature. His exertions in their last fights had drained his fire supply again, but he wrapped the fur coat around him for warmth instead of eating one of their last two leppa berries. The cold seemed to bother him more than it did for Ryu or Zephia.

As the sky began darkening and they stopped to rest, it was clear that there were no rocks big enough for Ryu to punch a shelter into. Fortunately, Zephia offered a solution.

"I've been digging holes to sleep in every day," she said, then patted the ground firmly with a paw. "Although this ground is pretty hard, and we need a much bigger dig with three of us, so you two had better help me out."

The idea of spending the night in a cramped, underground box didn't fill Fen with excitement. He wasn't sure how well he could dig either, though he was glad to at least have claws for it.

"That works for shelter, but we still need to find food and water," Ryu grumbled. "You two are starving as well, right? If we go hungry we're all just as likely to faint as if we get attacked again."

Zephia opened her mouth to snap a response at him, but Fen quickly intervened. "*Actually*, I have an idea… to find water, at least. I can climb a tree and get a greater view of the surroundings, see if there's a water source nearby. It's something I did before when there was a lot of fog around."

Zephia considered for a moment, then nodded her approval. "More likely to be food where there's water, too."

Fen wasn't too sure what she meant, but duly got to work on the nearest tree. The combination of its lack of branches and smooth bark made him rely more on his claws than usual for handholds, though he still reached the top with relative ease.

He looked through the gaps in the trees around him and immediately saw a number of bulky Pokémon prowling around the forest. Slightly terrified, he pulled himself closer to the tree trunk, even though there was little chance of any of the 'mon happening to look up. He soon spotted a grey dip in the ground that glinted slightly in the dim light, appearing to reveal what they were looking for. He also tried looking for a sign of the end of the forest, as he had done inside Hidden Wood, but it was to no avail. Not that he was surprised; this place was several times larger.

After jumping down and giving them the mostly good news, Zephia resumed her Seviper form as Fen led them to the site of water. They arrived one small safety detour later at a decently sized pond, where a couple of small Pokémon were already taking furtive sips at.

"Good work on the directions," Ryu said, giving Fen a nod. "But… unless we plan on eating tree bark and grass, there's still no food…"

Zephia eyed them both curiously, then her eyes seemed to flash in recognition. "Oh, I get it… you two don't normally hunt your food."

"Wh-what?!" Fen cried out. Her words immediately sent alarm bells ringing in his head. "We… we can't do that! We might be hungry, but killing another Pokémon for food is… no, we can't!"

Zephia now looked at him in bemusement. "Uh… what? I remember being told that humans eat Pokémon… but you can't bear the idea of it? What kind of weird human are you?"

"W-well, I… I…" Fen was floundering. Zephia was right; now that he thought about it, the types of Pokémon he knew were eaten by humans - Commons, Bugs and fish-like Waters - were the same ones Faoz had said were hunted by Pokémon themselves. *So why*

does the thought of killing and eating another Pokémon trigger such a strong reaction in me? Maybe because I'm one of them now…? But even so…

"I don't know what it is," he said finally. "I guess… these Pokémon are just like us, aren't they? They're living, breathing, fighting… it's wrong for us to have to kill them just to give ourselves food."

Zephia raised her eyebrows. "They're not like us at all," she said. "They're wild Pokémon. They have no concept of language; their tiny brains can pretty much think of *nothing* beyond staying alive and fighting whatever they have a chance of defeating. If they were to breed, their hatches would be immediately left to fend for themselves, growing up to be the exact same as their parents - braindead. See the difference? *We* are not wilds. We can think."

"But… but… it's not their fault they're wild!" Fen stuttered. "If they were looked after properly from birth, they could still be as intelligent as we are… right?" He turned to Ryu, hopeful that he'd back him up. But Ryu bore a similar, if slightly more concerned expression to Zephia's.

"Fen, I don't like the idea any more than you do… but if there's nothing else edible here, we don't have many other options," Ryu said. He paused for a moment. "And we did have to eat meat a couple of times when there was a drought of fruit in our woodland. Sometimes this *is* necessary."

Fen looked at him disbelievingly. *This has to be the first thing he and Zephia have agreed on.. .*

"Well… I'm not helping you hunt," Fen said.

"I was going to do that anyway," Zephia dismissed. "It shouldn't take long. And if someone-"

"Fills the water?" Ryu interrupted. "Yeah, I'll take care of that." Without waiting for a response, he got onto all-fours and headed

carefully towards the pond, leaving Fen and Zephia.

"Guess I'll just wait here for you," Fen said weakly.

Zephia gave him a disappointed shake of her head. "I'll go once we've got water, since what I do might cause a bit of a stir."

Then without warning, her appearance changed again, this time to a small Treecko. "Less intimidating. Easier to fool 'mon," she explained, in response to Fen's shocked expression.

Fen didn't feel like telling her that his shock was more due to how she reminded him of the poor, injured Treecko in Cheri Forest that he and Ryu had rescued, which itself felt like so long ago. He tried not to correlate those memories with whatever Zephia was about to do next.

When an equally confused Ryu came back, she moved off in his opposite direction. Fen watched her go about halfway to the pond and stop, keeping herself hidden under some tree roots. Though he hated what she was doing, he couldn't deny that Treecko was a very clever disguise given its body's natural stealth. And though he felt obliged to watch given her warning about other 'mon's reactions, a much greater proportion of him yearned to look away.

"I didn't know humans ate 'mon," Ryu said quietly next to him, almost making him jump.

"Huh? Oh, uh, I guess I just forgot about it."

Ryu hummed. "It's fine though. You can't have been missing it too much, if you'd forgotten…"

"I guess not." Fen smiled thinly. "I like the diet we have. I don't know how much I enjoyed fruit and plant-based stuff before, but everything here is all so fresh and flavoursome… It does help that most of what we've been eating is picked ourselves on the same day, but still…"

"Nah, I get ya," Ryu said. He scratched an ear. "So, uh… I noticed in those last fights you were using some new attacks."

"Oh, transferring fire into my fist and stuff?" Fen said. Ryu nodded back. "It was just a spur-of-the-moment thing… That idea hadn't occurred to me before I used it on the Seviper, and I don't think it's good to try often, given how energy sapping it was."

Ryu's eyes widened. "It was energy sapping?" he asked, a curious hint to the question.

"Well, it was then. Does that mean something bad?"

"No, no… I've just heard that if you're-" Ryu suddenly broke off and leaned forward. "Sorry - look."

Zephia's Treecko head had pricked up as a Zigzagoon came into view, zigzagging slowly towards the pond on their right. Its minute size made it more like a ball of bristly fur with a tiny head and limbs poking out. The last thing Fen would have wanted was to cause harm to the innocent creature.

Zephia crept forwards in line with the Zigzagoon until they were both at the water's edge, a few feet apart. The Zigzagoon turned its head right, then left in her direction. Fen expected Zephia to attack as soon as the two 'mon's eyes met, but when they did, she instead moved closer to the pond and lowered her head to drink. After observing her for a few moments, the Zigzagoon did the same.

Of course, she appears like just a normal Grass, and they wouldn't eat any meat… the Zigzagoon's completely unaware of what she is… it thinks it's safe…

Fen started feeling sick. He wanted to shout to the Zigzagoon. *Run away, before she kills you! Don't let her do this, please!*

While the Zigzagoon was still drinking, he saw the Treecko's head covertly turn towards it. He saw the swirl of darkness that meant

Zephia's illusion was disappearing. And before he knew it, he was running towards them, almost choking on his words.

"Stop! *STOP!* You're-"

His words were tackled out of the air, as Ryu grabbed him with enough force to make him crumple to the ground. Without looking ahead, Fen closed his eyes. He heard a desperate, ear-piercing squeal from the pond, and a snap that extinguished it almost as suddenly as it began. Distant squeals and cries echoed around them moments later, then Ryu was pulling him up, dragging him forwards with an iron grip on his wrist. Fen stumbled in his direction, eyes open but trying not to look at the Zorua they were following. When he briefly glanced up, he just saw something limp hanging from her mouth and immediately wished he'd kept his head down…

"Fen, it's okay. You can look up now."

Ryu was holding his shoulders, a determined look in his eyes. The previous few minutes seemed to have blurred together in Fen's mind.

"Zephia's gone a little distance away to sort out the food," Ryu said, before Fen could ask. "Look… I'm really sorry about tackling you then, but it was for the best. I didn't realise you'd react like that… I guess we should've taken you away beforehand."

"I don't - I don't blame you for anything," Fen managed to say, trying to stop himself shaking. "I d-didn't know that would happen either… all of a sudden I just got this awful feeling, and… I felt like I had to do something…"

Ryu looked pretty worried himself. *He doesn't know how to react… neither would I if he'd just done what I did. What's wrong with me…?*

"It's fine, 'mon," Ryu said eventually. "Do you wanna light a fire? That stuff normally helps calm you…"

He gestured to a small, already-built pile of wood next to them, and Fen nodded gratefully. He opened his mouth, then paused.

"Ryu, when you said that the only food here other than Pokémon was tree bark… did you mean that?"

Ryu looked at him pitifully. "Well… it'd be very difficult to get to the deep, healthy layers of bark given we have nothing to carve with. And I don't know what trees these ones are - they might not even be edible…"

I would be putting myself in unnecessary danger, Fen thought. *Plus, the further south we go, the more likely it seems that we'll* have *to hunt for food. I can't let this weird hang-up of mine ruin our whole journey. And I* am *starving…*

"Forget that idea," he said. "I'll just eat what we have."

Ryu nodded, but Fen could tell he was silently breathing a sigh of relief. "You… you wouldn't know what the food is when you look at it, by the way. It just looks like-"

"I've seen meat before," Fen said, before he could elaborate. "I'll be alright." He finally lit their fire with the biggest blast of flames he could manage, and watching the exploding wood was at least a little satisfying, as well as the comforting warmth it gave.

When Zephia had finished stripping the Zigzagoon of meat she separated the portions between them. While the other two were perfectly content to eat theirs raw (*like any normal Pokémon would be,* Fen thought despairingly), he held his share against the fire for a few minutes before considering it bearably-enough cooked. Despite not wanting to enjoy it, the food did help calm his jitters, and he was something close to relaxed by the time it was finished.

Before they started digging shelter, Zephia had asked Fen to find somewhere far from their campsite to dispose of the food bones.

Ryu had objected that it was dangerous and the Chimchar should be given a rest, but Fen himself had been happy to, perhaps feeling guilty at how he'd behaved earlier. As he left, concealing the bones under his fur coat, Ryu and Zephia sat on opposite sides of the fire, refusing to meet each other's eyes. Just being near her made Ryu grumpy.

He still hated Zephia for what she had done to them both in Cheri Forest; he doubted that would ever be forgiven. She certainly held both of them in plenty of contempt too. But what aggravated him the most was just how *good* she was despite that. In terms of her illusions, her sense of danger, her hunting, everything - without her, Ryu dreaded to consider where he and Fen would be now.

He was still hugely grateful for their safety - he would be stupid not to be. *But… why does this incredibly skilled 'mon have to be such a bastard, too?* he thought, huffing to himself.

Just then, a gust of wind blew through their campsite, extinguishing their fire. As Ryu blinked quickly, adjusting to the sudden darkness, something was happening in the fog. It swirled around their campsite, then began glowing grey, and within it there were other shapes materialising, screaming, floating towards them-

"NO!" Ryu screamed involuntarily, for his realisation of what was happening was so sudden, so terrifying. *Please… not again…*

He started scrambling backwards on his paws, but felt the earth suddenly dip beneath them. A divot. Once his limbs were stuck in it, they refused to move him out. He heard more screams of terror from behind him and saw the dark fog fast surrounding their campsite's circle, more Ghosts appearing.

Zephia was already on her feet, facing up to a Ghost with hollowed eye sockets, then one with the head of a tree-stump. She immediately looked unstoppable, showing no hesitation in tearing apart the apparitions with every swipe of her black-auraed claws. As Ryu watched fearfully, an all-too-familiar floating head suddenly burst

out of the fog right in front of him, the Ghost's huge pink tongue dangling from its jaws, poised to attack-

He screamed again just as Zephia came out of nowhere to bite down on the Ghost. It dissipated after a few moments of them tussling.

Zephia turned to him now, not bothering to remove the aura on her claws. "What are you doing?!" she shouted furiously above the cacophony of voices. "Get up and fight!"

"I can't!" Ryu cried back, shaking. "M-my attacks go s-straight through them…"

Zephia continued staring at him for a moment, then Ryu saw another Ghost fly towards them and frantically ducked his head into his body. *This is it,* he thought, curling into a ball. *I can't do anything… I'll have to hide here until the Ghosts disappear… like a coward…*

Something solid hit his legs. He looked at it - a rock, about the size of his palm.

He paused. A Ghost couldn't have thrown this… it had to have been Zephia. But why a rock? Was she just angry with him? That was understandable…

Zephia was busy fighting off another tree-stump-like creature. When it retreated, she briefly met Ryu's eyes, pointed to the rock, then awkwardly made a forward motion with one of her paws.

She… wants to me to throw it? Ryu snatched up the rock in his fist. A spherical Ghost with a pointed horn was flying towards him now, eyes glowing in some attack. Ryu managed to look at it just long enough to aim his throw and hurl the rock away from him, at which point his head pounded from whatever Psychic technique the Ghost had used. He immediately started to curl up again, but paused upon hearing the Ghost make a cry of complaint. It was tottering in the air, a deep, rock-shaped puncture in the middle of its head.

His attack had worked.

That realisation created a vast mix of emotions. There was relief, even euphoria, at the fact that something he'd believed for so long might be false - that he, as only a Riolu, *was* able to fight Ghosts after all. But if anything, it made him even more anxious than before, because he knew that his feelings about Ghosts went beyond mere fighting disadvantage. Previously he could use that as a justification for his petrifying fear, but without it… there was nothing, no excuse. He had to fight the Ghosts now, or else he really was a coward.

He carefully climbed out of the hole and gathered up as many nearby fist-sized rocks he could carry. Then getting an idea, he took one rock in his palm and drew energy into the fist as if about to use a force palm. He heard the spherical Ghost shriek at him again and instinctively twisted away, though he managed to stop himself retreating any more.

Deep breaths. *I shouldn't be afraid… these Ghosts are weak, and now I have the ability to face up to them… we can overcome this…*

Drawing back to his full height, he quickly powered up his fist again, waited until he couldn't bear the Ghost to come any nearer, then threw the rock. It flew perfectly into the Ghost, making a cracking sound on collision before the creature let loose a final shriek and turned to mist.

The rock fell to the ground, and before Ryu could think another Ghost flew out at him. Thinking again about the rock in his paw and not what was in front of him, he took aim, threw… and after another two rocks, the Ghost had vanished.

To his enormous relief, nothing new appeared immediately. The fog had faded significantly. But then Zephia's enraged cry made him spin behind him. The final Ghost was the one she was facing down. It was dark-purple coloured, standing far higher than her on two legs, and though its wide mouth grinned like many other Ghosts Ryu had come across, it looked more of an angry grimace than an expression

of mischief. Zephia's low panting suggested they had already been battling, but neither side was backing down.

Ryu continued fighting his instinct to flee, throwing his rock already in paw. Yet the Ghost foresaw the attack unthinkably quickly, growing a shadowy fist of its own to knock the missile away. As the Ghost's glare turned on him, Ryu was shocked for a moment, but regained his poise and met its eyes determinedly. He would *not* back away now, even if it meant taking a hit…

Then the Ghost lunged at him, and in willing himself not to move Ryu's body automatically tensed. There was a dull thud as the Ghost hit his ribs. He felt his body weaken, then weaken more until he feared he would faint under the pain. But he remained completely unmoved. He saw his fur glowing white, and realised:

I was so focused on not moving that my body used a counter. And that punch was physical, so… oh Mew, I hope this works-!

He leapt at the Ghost with all the energy he had left, the impact between them blinding him. He heard it scream, and he just managed to lift his head up to see the Ghost's image fading, its mouth twisted into a furious snarl. Then it screamed again and what was left of its body split into tiny screaming fragments, which flew straight through him and Zephia, making him shiver involuntarily as if he'd been dipped in ice.

Then everything was silent. The fog had disappeared; the Ghosts were gone.

For some reason, Ryu didn't find himself getting up from the ground. Zephia didn't help him, either. It wasn't until he heard Fen's footsteps approach that he was forced to move.

With their fire gone, Fen had lit a branch to see with, illuminating the bemusement on his face. "What happened?" he said. "Were you attacked?"

"By Ghosts, yeah," Zephia said.

"W-what?!" Fen exclaimed. "Ryu, are you-"

"I'm okay, 'mon," Ryu said, as the Chimchar came running over. "We fought them off together."

At Fen's curious look, Ryu picked up a nearby rock. "With these. Turns out I'm quite good at throwing them. I can use counters on 'em, too… though I'd known that already, just never wanted to try…"

From confusion, Fen's mouth slowly curved into a smile. "That's… heh, that's amazing!" he said, grinning. "Are you pleased?"

Ryu returned the smile. "Yeah."

Although he was, he didn't feel as happy as he ought he should. All his emotions felt strangely muted compared to when they'd fought the Ghosts. Perhaps it was just exhaustion.

It took him a moment to find Zephia again in the dimness. She was turned away from them, inspecting a patch of dirt carefully.

"Zephia?" Ryu said.

She grunted, turning her head to him.

"I, uh… would never have considered throwing rocks like that. And Ghosts have… caused me a lot of trouble in the past…"

She just shrugged. "It seemed pretty obvious to me. Good that it worked." She turned back to the dirt, moving her paws around experimentally. "This seems like good ground for digging," she announced. "If you two just watch me…" She paused, looking pointedly at the two of them who hadn't moved.

As Fen started to get up, Ryu blurted, "I just - thank you for doing that, okay? It matters a lot to me… even if it doesn't to you."

He thought he saw a faint smile flicker across Zephia's face, but then, as if catching herself, she turned away. "You know what does matter a lot to me? Digging this hole. So come and help me, already."

As they made their way over, Ryu exchanged glances with Fen, who gave him such a helpless look that he almost burst out laughing. As much as he and Zephia seemingly refused to get on… there really was much to admire about her. Much to *not* be angry at her for. He told himself to keep that in mind for the harsh days to come. Though it would be difficult.

Ambush

By sticking to Zephia's illusion, the three of them continued to be untroubled by wilds. But that was about the only positive they had.

As they finally moved beyond Arkan's ash, the temperature dropped continually. Fen started wearing the fur coat at all times to try and stave off his shivers, its itchiness barely noticeable by comparison. Digging required a combination of Fen roasting the ground with fire and Ryu punching downwards for it to be soft enough for Zephia to get her claws into. Zephia did not find food until deep into the night. They barely spoke unless they needed to; it was a waste of precious energy.

On their third morning since entering Smouldered Pass, the forest began an increasingly sharply incline, the trees becoming thinner and sparser. One hill climb in the early afternoon took them to the top of an uncovered cliff. And ahead of them, finally, was Glyciak Mountain.

When they emerged, there was a collective intake of breath at the sight of it. But this gasp wasn't in amazement or admiration, like when Fen had witnessed Ractyl's Belt or the view from Mt. Horizon for the first time. Glyciak looked terrifying.

They seemed to be at or near its peak, judging by how flat the snow-covered ground ahead was. But this only made it more intimidating; it was like an ocean of white, stretching far beyond even Fen's honed eyesight. Huge pillars of rock jutted out in places, and gales of wind blew snow powder off their surfaces. He had never wished for human clothes so dearly.

They'd come out at a stretch of rock that was disconnected from Glyciak by a foot. Fen carefully peered down through the gap between them, but up in the clouds it was impossible to tell how high

an altitude they were at. It would have been a very long climb from the bottom.

As Ryu looked down alongside him, they glanced uncertainty at each other. "Faoz… didn't give us much of an idea where exactly Darkrai's Knot was, did she?" Ryu said.

That was the one specific she didn't know, Fen thought regretfully *.* "No. She said she'd never been to Glyciak."

"Don't blame her," Ryu muttered, shaking his head.

"What?" Zephia snapped at them. "Don't tell me that neither of you know where we're going from here?"

"We know Darkrai's Knot is on this mountain," Fen said patiently. "We just don't know *where* exactly, because… well, I don't think anyone sane comes to visit it."

"What are we going to do, then?" Zephia demanded.

"I don't - look, just have some bloody patience, alright?" Fen hit back. "We can't know everything!"

He knew the cold was making him more spiky, but couldn't be bothered to restrain it. Zephia huffed and turned her muzzle away. "You should be the *least* patient, seeing how you're doing with this weather…"

"Hey, knock that off!" Ryu growled, stepping so he and Fen were both facing her. "Look, why don't we… uh… why don't… we…"

Fen looked hopefully at him for a few tense seconds.

"Why don't we just try asking the 'mon here where it is?" Ryu said eventually. "Surely that'll be faster than looking for it on our own."

"If the 'mon here are as braindead as those in the forest, asking won't get us anywhere," Zephia countered.

"But they can't *all* be wilds," Fen said. "We know already that the Pokémon living in Darkrai's Knot won't be."

Zephia chewed her lip, evidently annoyed. "That's true. I suppose we can start off with this as a plan… But I still don't think it'll work."

"For you, that's a glowing endorsement," Ryu said, earning another glare in response. He hopped over the small divide between them and Glyciak, then looked back at them. "And we won't freeze as fast if we're on the move, eh Fen?"

Fen felt obliged to give him a half-hearted chuckle, but was consumed with too much worry to laugh about their predicament.

After a few hours, their search had been utterly fruitless. Despite actively looking for Pokémon, they only ran into three - an ice-shelled variety of Sandshrew and two small, brown shaggy-haired creatures that Fen couldn't remember the name of. Those 'mon were unquestionably wild; when asked if they knew where Darkrai's Knot was, they simply gave a snarl in response before attacking whoever was closest. One positive Fen discovered was that both his flames and Ryu's punches were very effective in fighting the 'mon, and they didn't have a problem defeating them. But with that in mind, he was very conscious not to overuse his fire store and make himself even colder.

With the ground predominantly flat they were more exposed than ever to the arctic winds. The snow was often as high as Fen's waist, and blizzards seemed to arrive every hour. They could do nothing in defence of these but shelter behind nearby rocks or raised ground, which hardly helped. After Fen nearly lost sight of the others following one blizzard, Ryu refused to go further than a paw's reach of him. When Fen wasn't concentrating solely on keeping pace, he was feverishly, almost unconsciously checking that his tail flame - which had shrunk to the point of a mere flicker - hadn't been extinguished entirely.

Now, in front of him, Zephia suddenly stopped and lifted her muzzle to the air, which he was used to seeing. *Something's close-by.*

With minimal communication, they looked around for any glimpses of 'mon, and soon Ryu called, "I can see it!"

A dark, quadrupled figure was moving at a two o'clock to their left. The three of them ran so their paths could cross with it; Ryu and Zephia succeeded but Fen was left panting a few metres behind. The creature, black-furred with a few yellow markings, only skidded to a stop when both 'mon shouted for it, and even then it wore a very irritated expression.

"Yes? What do you want?" the Umbreon said in a similarly annoyed tone. "Better be good for this time of day…"

Zephia made a small gasp at this that Fen couldn't discern reason for, other than this finally not being a wild.

"We're looking for an Absol, who we thinks lives in Darkrai's Knot," Ryu said. "Except we don't know where to find that. Could you possibly… direct us there… please?"

He half trailed off, as the Umbreon's contemptuous look gave away her answer. "Our home is not open to those who merely ask," she sneered. "Especially not those of *your* kind." Fen found her piercing red eyes boring into him and Ryu.

"W-What?" Ryu stuttered. Fen noticed the yellow bands on the Umbreon's fur starting to glow ominously. "What's wrong with us? I didn't-"

Before he could finish, the yellow glow suddenly flared to a dazzling level; then Ryu was thrown backwards with a started yelp, quickly muffled by the snow. The Umbreon turned to Fen, and before he could even consider what to do he felt a sensation like his head being bashed against a brick wall. The shock of the pain completely disoriented him, and the biggest factor in returning him to his senses

was the searing coldness of snow. He found himself, somehow, face down in it just like Ryu was.

Lifting his head up, he saw the Umbreon and Zephia standing off, both snarling at each other. The Umbreon was keeping her distance this time.

"I don't know who you are, but don't even think about following me," the Umbreon told her. "Otherwise, your friends' heads might not recover again."

She started moving away, accelerating quickly. Zephia briefly looked restless, as if she might run after the Umbreon. But, after giving Fen and Ryu a derisory look, she walked over to them.

Fen hauled himself up and shook as much snow off as he could. Ryu was sitting down, holding his head low between his paws and giving occasional moans of pain. Even after helping him to his feet, the Riolu's head remained held.

"Psychics are the *worst*," Ryu mumbled to him. "I'd be much happier if I ended up in the snow by a strong punch or something, not… that weird stuff. Ughhhh, my head… *whyyyy*…"

Zephia, rather than give him sympathy, merely sounded purposeful. "I worked out some things from that Dark," she said. "Namely that this plan of ours is a complete waste of time."

"If 'mon like her are the only ones who'll speak to us, then I agree," Fen admitted. "But… what about the things she said? That she wouldn't tell 'our kind' directions? What group could Ryu and I possibly fit into?"

"Non-Darks, obviously," Zephia said at once.

"Wh… but how could she tell that you *were* a Dark?!"

"You just can," Zephia replied impatiently. "That's not important… well it is a little, but as she wouldn't even give *me* directions, it doesn't matter. Something that 'mon reminded me of, that I was *stupid* for forgetting, is that Darks are mostly nocturnal. That's surely why we've run into so few of them."

"So… we should look for them at night instead?" Ryu asked, now rubbing his head gingerly.

"Exactly. We should search through the night. We can always sleep during daytime tomorrow if needed."

"But…" *it's going to be even colder at night,* Fen thought miserably. He realised quickly that this wouldn't qualify as an acceptable excuse in Zephia's eyes, so he clamped his mouth shut and avoided her gaze.

"Even so," Ryu said, "you want us to keep the same strategy of asking for directions as before?"

"No!" Zephia snapped. " *You* just proved that it won't work. I thought we could try following a Dark instead, given I'd be able to disguise myself, but it's highly probable that they'll notice one of you two following at some point. Snow is loud, and they move fast.

"So here's what'll happen. Once we find a Dark, we'll injure it badly enough to convince it to do what we say. Then it should take us to Darkrai's Knot, no problem."

There was a considerable silence. Fen hadn't known what to expect, but it wasn't this.

"You're… going to attack innocent Pokémon, purely so you can force them to follow our orders," he rephrased slowly.

"That's the best plan I can think of," Zephia said. "If you have a better one, go ahead."

Fen couldn't stop his voice shaking. "Zephia, this is… so malicious… we're practically no better than criminals! Forcing orders on others through pain and threats… sentient Pokémon, no less… isn't that what happened to you, where you were captured-?"

As soon as he said the words a pair of claws shoved him down into the snow. Gasping in shock, he found Zephia staring down at him, one paw pressing on his chest. She was practically foaming with rage.

She only held him for a second before Ryu tackled her off. She quickly lashed out at him with her claws, but they missed. Ryu stood his ground next to Fen, and Zephia hissed at him a little, but she contracted the claws.

Then she turned angrily to Fen. "Don't ever, *ever* compare me to them again," she seethed.

Fen spat snow from his mouth. With Ryu by his side, he felt brave enough to demand, "Why shouldn't I? What you're saying isn't any different."

"It *is* different! " she said, voice shaking slightly. "This is one Pokémon, and it'll hardly suffer if it listens to us. We're not holding it hostage for the rest of its life!"

She paused. When she continued, her aggression had vanished. "Look, I don't get any pleasure out of this. We simply don't have a choice. Like I said: if either of you want to offer a better plan, my ears are all up."

Fen glanced at Ryu, who looked as uncomfortable as he was. "Ryu?"

"I hate it, but I can't think of another way," Ryu said briefly.

That was how he felt too. As bad as this was, as much as he hated it… Zephia was right. He had to place their cause's value above the

suffering of one innocent Pokémon.

"You win, Zephia," he said. "We'll follow your plan."

Zephia only gave a little nod, as if she'd expected his agreement from the start. "Let's keep walking then. In fact…" she angled her muzzle upwards to the misty air. "I can smell something else around here… I'm not sure…"

She led them forwards with careful steps. "There is something," she muttered after a minute, "but its scent is… really strong, I think."

Fen cast a concerned look to Ryu at this. *Just yesterday, a strong scent would be a sign that we run away from here…*

When Zephia stopped again they were facing a steep bank of rock. It had a giant, bird-shaped dent in the centre, and a crater of snow below it. The shadows created by the rocks and the depth of the crater made it difficult to make out what was inside, but Fen could just about see a thick blue-and-red object sticking out. Then they drew closer and he realised it was a tail, attached to what must be a humongous body. The tail alone was five times his size, maybe more.

"Mew… this looks like a Dragon…" Ryu whispered, a hint of fear in his voice. "Is it dead? How'd it even get here…?"

Before anyone could reply, Fen heard a movement of snow and an orange head rose up from the crater, behind the fallen 'mon's tail.

The moment the 'mon scurried out of the hole, Zephia sprinted towards it and lunged with her claws. The orange 'mon spun away though, dropping to all fours before stunning Zephia with a blast of water in her face. With the window of time that gave her, she glanced at Fen and Ryu behind the Zorua, looking ready to blast them too, but then…

She froze. So did Fen. Despite how matted and discoloured the orange 'mon's fur was, he instantly recognised the fins on her arms, the odd yellow sac around her shoulders, the hardy look she always carried. *Faoz?*

Faoz was so stunned that that she made no effort to evade Zephia's brutal slash at her ribs a moment later, which knocked her to the ground.

"Zephia, no!" Fen screamed simultaneously with Ryu, the attack bringing him out of shock. "Don't attack! She's a friend!"

But neither 'mon seemed to have heard. Faoz had recovered before Zephia could get any nearer, her two tails beginning to spin rapidly. She glided snowboard-like around the snow for a moment before water rushed to the tails. She swung them into Zephia, sending the Zorua to the floor this time. In a moment of silent cooperation, Fen and Ryu ran in front of Zephia to stop her retaliating, yelling the same orders at her again. Only when faced with this confusing scenario did she pause for thought.

"She's… a friend?" Zephia repeated sceptically.

"Yes!" Ryu said furiously. "That means you don't try and kill her, you idiot!"

Irritated, Zephia cocked her head to one side. "You two have never mentioned anyone being here with you… *Who* is she, anyway? Why is she here?"

Fen had no answer to that, and instead looked uncertainly to Faoz. The Floatzel was breathing heavily, an unusually wild look in her eyes.. She met his gaze but didn't smile.

"You… you made it," she said between breaths. "I didn't expect… I thought you wouldn't stand a chance…"

"Faoz, what's going on?" Fen asked, a slightly desperate tone to the question. "How did you… I don't know… travel so fast?"

"Shaice," Faoz breathed. She jerked her head at the Pokémon inside the crater. "It's thanks to him that I got here so quickly… but we arrived during a blizzard, he lost control and crashed…"

Ryu gave a yelp at this. "Is he alright?!" he asked, sounding as if his life depended on it.

"Well, Salamence and snow don't mix well," Faoz said, speaking clearer now. "Even with healing berries he's taking a while to recover. But he's doing better than he looks."

Where Faoz had found a willing Salamence to ride was still anyone's guess, but it wasn't top of Fen's priorities to find that out.

"So… why are you here, Faoz?" he asked.

"Because *you* were right!" Faoz replied, exasperated. "I don't know how you knew something was wrong, but the weather has deteriorated so much since you left town… The worse it became, the more I started worrying for you, because I doubted you'd be willing to turn back even in the worst of conditions… but I knew you had the right idea coming here, which is why I came too, to try and speak to an Absol… but that hasn't exactly worked out…"

She gave another glance to the Salamence, then back at them. "Do you know if you're close to Darkrai's Knot?" she suddenly asked, with an intensity that made Fen jump.

"Uh… not yet?" he said. "We have a plan, though…"

He looked expectantly at Zephia, who huffed at him before reluctantly explaining her idea to Faoz. Faoz showed no shock; she only looked at Zephia with an increasing intrigue.

"Well, that explains the misunderstanding," she said wearily, once Zephia had finished, but then added. "Who are you? I've never seen a species like yours before."

"Why does it matter what my species is?" Zephia growled back. She was leaning forwards, as if about to attack Faoz again.

Faoz's tails swished a little as she said this, but they quickly calmed down. "It doesn't… I'm just wondering how you ended up with these two," she said. "But if you don't want to tell me, then-"

"It's none of your business," Zephia said stubbornly.

"Fine," Faoz said, waving an arm dismissively. She addressed the three of them. "You should continue with your plan. Don't worry about me; I can't leave Shaice on his own out here, not with so many wilds around… I think his scent is attracting them."

"But… can't we help him at all?" Ryu asked.

"No!" Faoz said firmly, though her voice still shook a little. "Get away from here. It's not safe."

"B-but?!" Ryu seemed at a loss. "Aren't you in more danger than us?"

"I'll be fine!" Faoz snapped. "I brought food with me. Water is easy enough; I can just melt the snow. There's no shelter for you here. *You* -" she glared at Fen, "are going to freeze if you just stand around. In fact, don't waste your time hunting. Here." She pulled out a slightly frosted apple from her bag and chuckled it at Ryu, who briefly juggled it in his surprise. "Now get moving!"

Fen looked at Ryu again, who seemed to ask, like him, *'what else can we do?'* He shuffled his feet restlessly. Faoz's shaky state worried him, but she wasn't taking anything else for an answer. He'd followed all the advice she'd given them so far, and it had proved so useful… he felt obligated to trust her again now.

"Faoz," he began, "in case we don't see you again-"

"But you will," Faoz dismissed. "Don't be so defeatist. Just get away from here, alright?"

Fen sighed, and reluctantly agreed. Zephia led them into the snow beyond.

"A *Salamence,* though, they're so rare!" Ryu said once they were out of Faoz's earshot. "Y'know, some days when I got tired out I would just watch the sky, hoping to see one overhead… I didn't think the first one I'd see up close would be like that. I sure hope Faoz knows what she's doing with him…"

"Considering she was riding one in the first place, I'd wager that she does," Fen said. "I'm glad that she at least agrees with us now. Though I hadn't considered how the natural disasters would be affecting habitats asides from ours."

"Yeah… you're right," Ryu murmured, looking at the ground. It had been many days of travel since they had seen his family. "Well, no point wondering about that…"

By the time they finally found another Dark, the sun had long since passed.

Fen didn't know that it was possible to feel so cold. Every gust of wind was like a sheet of ice, and he weakly pleaded a couple of times for them to stop whenever a shelter-sized rock was passed, which Zephia, of course, refused with a huff. Though even she and Ryu had started shivering by this time.

The only positives Fen could see were that he was too terrified of freezing to feel tired, and that their stomachs must've been too cold to realise that a third of an apple wasn't an adequate meal for a nightlong struggle across endless tundra.

The Sneasel they fought was persistent. It landed attacks on all of them and moved as fast as any 'mon Fen had come across, but their numerical advantage meant victory was only a matter of time.

When Ryu correctly predicted it would slash at him, he tensed himself and countered the attack. While it was stunned, Fen slashed at it with his own claws, not making much contact due to how camouflaged the Sneasel was in the dark. But Zephia followed up by tackling it to the ground where she was able to hold it still.

Fen and Ryu bent down to get a closer look at it; the Sneasel's pointed red eyes looked furious. " *Whooooo* are you?" he asked. His voice was as frosty as the ice it had been breathing in attack.

"Who we are doesn't matter," Zephia said. "We need to find Darkrai's Knot, and you're going to help us, Dark."

At this, an odd expression came over the Sneasel; his anger certainly receded, though Fen couldn't understand why. "And… *whyyyy* do you want to go there?" he asked quietly.

"We have to speak to an Absol!" Ryu said immediately.

Somehow, a grin came over the Sneasel's face at this, and he made a weird cackling that seemed to be laughter. "Absol… why, I'm not sure she's even *aliiiive*," he hissed. "You're wasting your time."

"Don't bullshit me, you feather-faced skeleton!" Zephia snapped. "You're going to show us where the Absol is. Or I'll break one of your arms."

The Sneasel looked coolly at her. "Fine, I'll do it," he said. "But first, there's one thing I should tell you… here…"

He motioned for Zephia to lean her head closer, as if to whisper something in her ear. Zephia moved slightly, then hesitated. In that moment the Sneasel saw its chance, opening his mouth and firing freezing air at her. Momentarily stunned, the Sneasel wriggled his

body out of her grip too quickly for Fen and Ryu to grab another hold, and started scrambling away.

Once the Sneasel was gone, Fen knew there wasn't a hope of catching it in the snow. He felt despair rise up inside him. This had been their best chance at finding an Absol, but being so weak already, they might not even get another one-

Something white suddenly hurtled through the air, too fast for him to see, and crunched into the back of the Sneasel's head. The 'mon stopped running at once, swayed slightly, then crumpled head first into the snow.

Fen heard Ryu yelp beside him. "I didn't mean to hit him so hard! I mean, I did want to stop him, but… Mew, is he alright?"

"Oh, he's fine," Zephia muttered, stomping over to the Sneasel. "A lump of snow isn't gonna kill anyone."

Fen looked to Ryu. "You threw a snowball at him?"

"Snowball? Is that what they're called?" Ryu asked, tail between his legs.

"Yeah. Humans throw them for fun, when there's snow on the ground. Though they generally can't throw as hard as you…"

Ryu sighed. "It was all I could think of."

"I don't know why it bothers you," Zephia said, bending over the Sneasel and turning him over. There was a pinkish lump forming where the snowball had hit its head. "In fact, your 'snowball' was very effective. We've got him. If he's got any sense at all, he'll do what we say when he wakes up."

Ryu said nothing, seemingly too concerned with his own savagery to acknowledge a rare Zephia compliment.

"What if he still refuses?" Fen asked.

"He won't," Zephia said, looking intensely at Fen. "I know my own type, Fen. We're not stupid."

Zephia turned out to be right. When the Sneasel came around a few minutes later, the sly, careless look he had been carrying was gone.

"I'll do whatever you say," he said quietly, failing to disguise the fear in his voice. His body seemed to have shrunk several inches.

"Good," Zephia replied. "You're leading us to Darkrai's Knot."

The Sneasel tried unsuccessfully to get to his feet. When Fen offered him a hand up after a few seconds, the Sneasel gave him a look of such disgust that he couldn't withdraw it fast enough. Once the Sneasel was finally moving, he trudged through the snow with such feebleness that not even Zephia seemed to have the heart to tell him to speed up.

As the adrenaline from their fight wore off, the cold hit Fen once more. He had to tell himself over and over not to succumb to it. The trance-like state this put him in was so strong that when the Sneasel stopped ahead of him, he walked straight into Zephia's back. He realised with alarm that the sun was starting to rise again. *We've been awake almost 24 hours…*

Ignoring Zephia's growls of annoyance, Fen poked his head around her to look at their surroundings. What looked like a small opening in a rock stood ahead. He was confused, until getting closer revealed that it sunk right into the ground, creating a hole big enough for all four of them to fit through. The space around the cave's entrance had a plethora of footprint shapes marked, which did a decent but not perfect job of clearing the snow, given that a new layer of it seemed to fall every hour.

"This is it," the Sneasel said simply.

" *This* isn't it, though," Zephia rebutted. "We're here for an Absol, remember?"

"Oh, right…" The Sneasel seemed abnormally relaxed for his situation, drawling his words. "Yeah, an Absol lives here… thing *isssss*, I'm not sure I want to disturb her, given how she's been recently… very aggressive…"

"But *we do* !" Fen said impatiently, sudden anger at the Sneasel banishing his fatigue. "You have no idea how important this is!"

"Sure," the Sneasel said coolly. "Well, there's something else I think you should know… The 'mon here don't like seeing new faces around, especially ones they might not think *belong* here…" He looked gleefully at Fen and Ryu at this, then turned to Zephia. "I don't know what *you* are, mind you, but your friends… I don't think they'll be welcome at all."

Fen was now aware of the Sneasel taking small, almost unnoticeable steps towards the cave. But the 'mon kept talking before he could act.

"One more thing." The smugness on the Ice 'mon's face was stronger than ever. "You could bully me into helping you while we were miles from the Knot. But now… you're on my snow. *Our* snow. My family, y'see, aren't ones to be messed with. Once I tell 'em that I've been beaten up by a group of mere *hatches,* forced into leading them here, well…" The Sneasel's mischievous grin suddenly appeared far more sinister. "Good luck getting out of here alive, I guess. Have fun!"

Putting on a burst of speed that none of them were prepared for, the Sneasel plunged into the darkness of the cave. They simultaneously ran over, but Fen could see nothing at all. Neither could the others, it seemed; Zephia swore loudly, which encouraged Ryu to yell at her.

"This is all your fault! This is what you get for thinking it's okay to just… abuse Pokémon's wishes! If we'd just-"

"Just *what* ? Frozen ourselves to death instead?" Zephia shouted back. "It was my idea that took us *this* far, so don't blame me, you

pathetic-"

In attempting to quell them, and in his own desperate condition, something between Fen saying "STOP!" and a wounded-sounding roar emerged from his jaws. Ryu and Zephia froze and stared at him, both looking slightly astonished. Equally disturbed, Fen coughed and cleared his throat.

"It's not over yet," he said steadily. "The Sneasel doesn't know who you are, Zephia. You could disguise yourself as something; maybe a Sneasel yourself, if you remember what he looked like?"

Zephia took a few heavy breaths, and her eyes gradually regained focus. "I could… though a different species would be sensible, if his family's around."

"And you might be able to get directions to the Absol if you asked down there," Ryu added.

"I might, but what about you two?" Zephia looked pointedly at Fen. "*You're* the important one in this. If you wait here, the Sneasel will find you. If you go inside and *anyone* finds you… same result. We're finished."

She's right, Fen thought. *And unless the Sneasel was lying to us, his family have far greater numbers… not to mention the advantage of conditions.*

But he had to find this Absol; *he* had to talk to her. He was as certain of it as anything he'd known in this life.

"We'll have to come with you and not get seen," he said. Zephia gave him a withering look as if this was the worst idea in the world. "What?" he snapped. "It'll be dark down there. Why not?"

She scowled. "We have nothing else, I suppose. But your tail will have to go out."

This idea immediately sparked anxiety in Fen's gut. "M-my tail?" he repeated dumbly. "I can't put it out. Not unless I'm asleep."

"Well… you have your seed?"

"I threw that already," Ryu said. "Would be useful now."

"Then…" Zephia looked over Fen once more, a dark look in her eyes.

"You're not going to knock me out!" he said, almost pleading.

"Your screams would be guaranteed to get us caught," Zephia agreed. "But there must be another way. You can't control it *at all* ?"

"I can to some extent, but not-"

He stopped as another gale of freezing wind hit them, and he cowered further than ever into the confines of his fur coat.

"Wait, that's it!" Ryu cried over the gale. "The coat, Fen! Tie it 'round your tail, obscure the flame!"

Zephia's eyes flashed. "Give it to me," she said.

Helped by Ryu, Fen forced the heavy skin off his shoulders and passed it to her. She took an edge and started frantically gnawing along it, until a sizeable piece had been ripped off. She wordlessly chucked it to Ryu, who cursed several times in trying to avoid the now-tiny fire on Fen's back.

"There," Ryu panted, when it had at last been tied around the flame. "All good, Fen?"

Added to the cold, Fen suddenly felt like the air's supply of oxygen had been slashed. It took a couple of agonising seconds for him to inhale enough air through his mouth. It got a little easier once he was used to it, but it wasn't pleasant.

"I don't think I can run," he said weakly, gesturing to his throat.

Zephia smirked. "Good, that would attract attention." Her form changed shape to a larger black creature, yellow rings on her tail, head and torso. She addressed them both. "Stay close, and *be stealthy.* Whether or not that little Dark weasel finds us is a matter of luck, but it doesn't mean you can't improve your chances."

"Zephia?" Fen said, just as she turned towards the cave opening. "I think you forgot the ears."

She muttered something derogatory under her breath, and the long black ears of an Umbreon shimmered into being. "Any other faults?" she snapped.

Technically, she was still missing the ears' rings, but in their situation such things could be excused. "No," Fen said.

So Zephia led them into the opening. Though steep at first, the tunnel receded quickly until it was as smooth as anything Fen had walked across. The precision felt somehow unnerving.

More unnerving was what lay at the end of the corridor, beyond which the tunnel split in two. Between them, flickering from a wick in the wall, was… what looked like fire. Yet it burned with a grimy, purple flame. Fen felt anxious again at the sight. He had hoped, rather irrationally, that this place would not be lit up at all.

Still, they reached the split without event. Though torches lined the walls of both turnings, long stretches between them left plenty of shadows. Then, before Fen could take in any more, Zephia shoved him and Ryu against the middle wall, momentarily losing her illusion. "What did I say about being stealthy?" she hissed. "I'll do the lookout work. You just stay hidden."

After she had peered down both paths, she took them right. "There's more turnings this way," she explained. "The more lost we are, the less likely the Sneasel are to find us."

So they turned right, left, left then right again in a matter of moments, before suddenly hearing a thudding of limbs from an opening nearby.

"Wrong, wrong, *wrong!* " a male voice rumbled. "Do your little ears pick up *anything* I tell you, boy?"

Zephia crept along the wall towards the source of the voice. Unwilling to try and stop her, Fen and Ryu were forced to follow.

"Don't show him claws *before* you even do anything," the voice continued. "This is a fight, not a dance. Surprise is paramount."

"There's an open door ahead," Zephia whispered. "Stay here. I'll take care of it."

"Well, what if the claws *are* for surprise?" a youthful voice replied, sounding equally as riled as the first 'mon. "What if I'm trying to work out which direction he'll move?"

"Convince me that you can *attack* before trying to discuss strategy," the first voice said. "Now-"

He trailed off as Zephia strode forwards into the passage.

"Hello," she said, deepening her voice a notch.

There was a growl. "Do I know you?" the first voice said. "Did you ever learn that it was rude to interrupt?"

Peering around the corner of the wall, Fen he could see a purple flame on the inside of the room, giving a dim reflection of the speaker. Though only its head was visible, its sharp, pointed features and thick green scales were unmistakable. The thought of even a single angry Tyranitar - and its expression certainly looked unamused - was just about as scary their current predicament.

"Oh, do excuse me," Zephia said, unusually breezily. "I'm a little new here. I've heard an Absol lives in these tunnels. Do you know where I could find her?"

Surprisingly, the Tyranitar gave a throaty chuckle. "You want Osri? You *must* be new. You can't help her, you know. We already tried. Even the most sympathetic here have lost hope."

"Nevertheless," Zephia said, "I'd like to see her."

The Tyranitar scowled. "We moved her to the cellars. I hope you know your way *there.* "

At Zephia's slight hesitation, the second voice chirped up. "Just turn right out of here and follow the corridor to the end-"

" *Enough,* Crissen," the Tyranitar snapped. His eyes narrowed at Zephia, looking so intensely that Fen shuffled backwards despite being out of the 'mon's sight. "Where are you from, Umbreon?"

"A faraway place," Zephia replied.

"That all?"

"No. But I don't find much purpose in talking about pasts." Zephia gave him a conclusionary nod, and began turning away. "Apologies for the inconvenience."

The Tyranitar watched her leave, but started speaking to the younger Pokémon as soon as she turned out of sight. It left Fen and Ryu free to rush past the small corridor that the room looked out into.

"You heard that 'mon's directions?" Fen whispered to Zephia.

"Straight ahead from here," she said. "Guess we got lucky."

This corridor forked off several times, though each turning was passed without anyone seeing them. As they continued, Fen began to shiver again; he'd hardly noticed how much warmer it had been inside the tunnels. The spaced-out torches began disappearing too, leaving them almost in darkness.

"If we're looking for a place called 'the cellar', shouldn't this path take us downwards?" Ryu said as they rounded one corner, still sticking to the wall.

"Be quiet," Zephia hissed back. "We don't know any- YAHHH!"

Zephia's illusion suddenly vanished, and by the time Fen caught sight of her she hung precariously below him. One front paw was hanging, claws out, onto their platform, which had suddenly ended. The rest of her was in the air.

Without a word, Fen and Ryu grabbed her other front paw and helped her back up. The corridor they had been following led outside… straight off one of Glyciak's cliffs.

"What the *fuck* is this," Zephia muttered, a little shakily. "That Dark kid… he wanted to lead us to our deaths, the evil little-"

She stopped, as they all did, hearing nearby voices. Fen poked his head around their corridor and saw three distinct shapes lit up in the torchlight. Then footsteps towards them.

"We need to get out of here," Fen said urgently.

"Run?" Ryu said.

"That won't be suspicious at all," Zephia muttered. She regained her illusion. "Get behind me."

Against the wall once more, they walked as quickly as they dared. Fen hid so closely behind Zephia's illusion that he couldn't see the Pokémon approaching, and only knew they were close once Zephia stopped next to a slight crook in the wall. Without a word, Fen and Ryu pushed themselves against it so Zephia could shield them from view. They were agonisingly close to the tunnel's nearest fork, a matter of feet.

"What're you doing down here, girl?" a harsh, female voice said. "Only one reason a 'mon would be wandering the corridor of darkness…"

"I got lost," Zephia said, with what Fen hoped was now deliberate shakiness. "That's all."

"You got lost *here* ?" The voice almost made Fen audibly gasp. It was undoubtedly the sound of a Sneasel, though he couldn't tell if it was the same one they'd met. He and Ryu managed to keep quiet. "What the hell were you looking for?" the Sneasel asked.

"It was… a 'mon called Crissen," Zephia said. "I'm supposed to be his new training partner, or something."

"Are you now?" the female voice said. "You must be pretty weak for an Umbreon, then."

Zephia growled slightly. "Would you like me to challenge that for you?"

The female laughed easily. "No. But I *would* like to know about the 'mon you're hiding from us."

Zephia paused, then suddenly leapt forwards. Fen saw her tackle the female 'mon backwards - it was a purple-and-yellow furred species that he didn't recognise - then caught a glimpse of the Sneasel with her, staring at him and Ryu. But Ryu surprised him too with a quick attack. With both 'mon stunned, Fen, Ryu and Zephia looked at each other, then ran into the near passageway. Although in Fen's condition, Ryu was mostly pulling him along by the wrist.

This one forked three ways; Zephia swerved to the left, leaving them with no choice but to follow, then left again, and then - she yelped and fell downwards. This time Fen couldn't stop himself falling with her. The tunnel did not disappear entirely, but dipped so sharply that they more-or-less rolled down it, hitting the bottom in a tangled heap.

Fen needed some time just to gasp for breath, his throat feeling tighter than ever. Miraculously, no voices seemed to follow them.

The corridor ahead was much like those before; straight, with various offshooting paths. But it was different too; bleak, in a way the precisely carved and well-lit passages hadn't been. The only source of light came at the end of the corridor, which looked a long way away. Despite Fen's nose barely feeling functional with his flame obscured, he could pick up an unpleasant, sweaty smell.

"I'd guess this is the cellar," Ryu muttered, and the others nodded agreement. They had blindly gotten halfway to their destination. Now they just needed a final stroke of luck to find Osri.

As they approached one dark side-passage - though they were all dark here - Zephia stopped again, hearing voices from towards the light source.

"This is stupid," one voice said. "There's no way they could've come this far. Why have we gotta patrol this stinking pit?"

"You sound scared," another snidely replied. "The dark corridors a bit much for you?"

"Shut it," the first voice said. "It not like anyone relevant even lives here. I'm just tired of those Weavile acting like they run this place-"

What happened next was almost instantaneous. A figure appeared in the hallway, carrying a fire-lit torch. Its head turned in their direction. Zephia suppressed a gasp and flew into the passage next to them. Fen and Ryu had no choice but to do the same.

Once they had gathered inside, the first thing Fen did was listen for any noise from the two searching 'mon. There was none. Then, upon looking around the small, dimly-lit room - it was *lit* ! - he realised that they were not alone.

Sitting across from him, Ryu and Zephia, its legs neatly crossed, was a Sableye. A Sableye with only one eye, it seemed, with a gruesome void where the other should have been. The sparkling jewel it did have was gazing at them all with wonder - if it was possible for a rock to convey any emotion.

"A Sableye has visitors," he said, his voice as fragile as old stone. It was so faint that none of them could ask him to be quieter.

The Sableye picked up another jewel, scrubbed it a little with a cloth, then with a sudden forceful push, fit it perfectly into his open eye socket.

Fen wondered why none of he, Ryu or Zephia had moved. There was something so unsettling, yet also entrancing about this 'mon… but most importantly, he appeared to have no interest in ratting them out.

Before Fen could discuss what they did, though, Zephia spoke. "Sableye," she whispered, "we need to find an Absol, we think she's somewhere close-by, but we have no real idea where. Do you know?"

"A 'mon requests help before a Sableye has even had a chance to meet them?" the Sableye said, sounding dismayed. "A 'mon could learn some manners. A 'mon could at least inform a Sableye of who they are."

At this, Zephia exchanged bemused, bordering on furious looks with Fen and Ryu. "Listen here," she growled. "If you don't-"

"Wait!" Fen interrupted, noticing what looked like alarm cross the Sableye's face. He ignored Zephia's subsequent glare at him. "Um… hello Sableye," he said. "My name's Fen."

The Sableye looked at him. "A Sableye is pleased to make your acquaintance."

That's a good start, Fen thought. "How are you doing today?" he asked.

At this, the Sableye gave him a grin so wide and bright that it offered more light than the feeble torch he had in the corner. "A 'mon named Fen is well-mannered," he said. "A Sableye has just finished polishing his eyes. A Sableye must keep them looked after in his old age."

Though it was cruel to think about, Fen was not surprised in the slightest that this Sableye had presumably been forced to live in this desolate place by other Darks.

"A Sableye is interested to know what a 'mon named Fen is doing inside these tunnels," the Sableye added, surprising Fen.

He wondered whether speaking like the Sableye would help their cause too. Probably not. They were pushing their luck enough already. "We're here to find a certain Pokémon," he said. "An Absol."

"An Absol moved here recently," the Sableye said, nodding. "A Sableye knows where."

"Would a - um, would *you* be able to tell us where?" Fen asked.

"A Sableye could show you," the Sableye said brightly, then started stretching out his thin legs to stand.

"Thank you, Sableye," Fen said quickly, "but… there are 'mon here that are looking for me. I don't want you to get in trouble for helping me." That sounded like a better reason than *'you'll probably walk so slow that we'd all be certain to get caught'* .

"A 'mon named Fen has done bad things?" the Sableye said, surprised.

"No!" Fen said at once. "Well… perhaps. But for good reasons, important reasons. Done so we can talk to the Absol."

The Sableye considered for a second. "A Sableye understands that the world is not one of merely good and bad. A Sableye apologises."

"I appreciate your apology," Fen said, relieved.

"An Absol lives merely at the far end of this Sableye's corridor. An Absol is deeply disturbed," the Sableye said, voice suddenly darkening. "A Sableye hopes a 'mon named Fen will treat her kinder than others have done."

"We will," Fen said, as they made a move to get up.

"But…" the Sableye said, "if a 'mon named Fen wishes not to be seen, a Sableye knows another way through…"

He got up, turned around and started walking further into his room, where no light reached. After a quick exchange of looks, Fen led the three of them behind him.

Where the Sableye's room ended, there was an opening in the rock, barely wide enough for even their small forms to fit through. But Fen could see that it came out, through an equally tight exit, next to the same crossroads they had wanted to reach before.

"This is… brilliant," he said, honestly. "Thank you, Sableye."

The Sableye nodded, and gave his sparkling grin once more. "A Sableye hopes a 'mon named Fen will come and visit again."

Fen managed to hold a hopeful look back, not wanting to upset the strange 'mon with the apparently unobvious truth.

Then, letting Zephia in first, they squeezed into the tunnel. This one was filled with rocks and rubble, slowing their pace, but no eyes looked in on them.

After making it to the end, Zephia poked her head out. "They're nowhere to be seen," she said. "It's clear."

So they left the passage, hurried down yet another deserted corridor, until there was only one room in front of them, its entrance sloping downwards. Though in darkness, Fen could make out heavy, haphazard breathing from inside. *This must be it.*

They carefully gathered inside the room. Given its total darkness, Fen judged it safe enough to finally untie the fur around his tail. He didn't expect to suddenly have a fit of black smoking coughs when it was free, and fortunately he had been facing the entrance rather than anyone in particular, though he heard Ryu mutter a curse of amazement.

"Well, if anyone *was* following us they would've noticed that," Zephia murmured.

But to Fen's relief, after an initial wild flare, his tail had returned to its normal size. It enabled him to see Ryu and Zephia standing with him and, at the other end of the cave, a single Pokémon lying there.

It was an Absol, no doubt, but it looked like no other Pokémon Fen had seen in Kyunn. Its body was malnourished to the point where it resembled a fur-covered skeleton; pools of liquid - he assumed it was sweat - surrounded its body; and its head was slumped against the cave floor.

The sight felt almost unbearable. He had anticipated having to fight an Absol perhaps, for disturbing its home; but to see one in this state, despite all they had heard about this 'mon… he wasn't at all prepared.

He shook his head. *Focus, now. Osri. That was her name.*

"Osri?" he said, his voice echoing in the chamber. "Osri, are you awake? We need to speak to you."

The Absol lifted her head and opened her eyes for a brief second. They were tiny, unfocused red slits. Then she whined, and her head

slumped down again. Before Fen could think of something else to do, she surprised him by speaking, her voice faint.

"I do not recognise you… but I beg you, leave me alone…"

Wary of what everyone had told them of Osri, and even more so by how she looked now, Fen hesitated to move closer. "Osri, we want to learn about the natural disasters," he tried. "We need to know - we thought you might know - why they're-"

"OWAAAEEEEHHH!"

Out of nowhere, Osri gave a ferocious howl at them, her horn raised aggressively. But the aggression vanished almost immediately. Her head dropped again, and when she spoke it was as quiet and pained as before.

"The disasters… they cripple me, drive me to insanity… I lose track of time, of memories… I scream at them to stop, but they never relent, they-"

She cried out again, before suddenly breaking down into hysterical tears, adding a few drops to the water around her.

"But why are they happening?" Ryu said beside Fen. He sounded equally as worried, but started taking small steps towards Osri, holding a paw out. "If you tell us, we'll stop them, we'll help you Osri! We… we really want to help you…"

Osri howled again and swung her scythe-like horn wildly in Ryu's direction. He yelped, barely jumping backwards fast enough. Then Osri lifted her head and moaned, "Only the Gods could inflict this upon me. The movers of earth and sea are fighting… their conflict brings the whole of nature out of balance…"

"What? The… the movers of earth and sea?" Ryu repeated sceptically. "Surely… you can't mean Groudon and Kyogre, can you?"

The moment Ryu said their names, Fen knew it to be true, like puzzle pieces fitting together in his head. The earthquakes, the rainstorms; both so powerful, yet appearing out of thin air… they were the only Pokémon able to do such things. It had to be them.

Suddenly, his head was filled with moving images, as if playing a film. He could see both Groudon and Kyogre, colliding with each other like two great Mightyena wrestling. There were tidal waves appearing from nowhere, chunks of land being crushed under their feet… he heard people screaming, running from their homes, clutching nothing but the people they held dear… he could feel the terror rising in himself, but he couldn't turn away… he had to-

"AAAAGHHH!"

An immense shockwave of pain hit his head. The world spun, and he hit the ground before he was even aware of it. His heart was beating so fast that he expected it to burst out of him.

Ryu was kneeling over him, eyes wide with fear. "Fen, w-what - are you okay…?"

I… what did I just see? That scene… there were people, human *people… that couldn't be Kyunn… but if I saw it happen, then…*

He tried recalling the images, but the smallest probe into his mind made him wince in agony. His vision flickered, but he managed to recover and look Ryu in the eyes. "S-she's right," he said, body shaking. "Groudon and Kyogre… I s-saw them… they're awake…"

"Fen… they can't be," Ryu said disbelievingly. "Groudon and Kyogre are stories. They don't really exist, they're just like the other legendaries-"

" *They're alive!* " Fen burst out. " *I saw them!* Osri can't be wrong! Osri," he gasped, turning to the Absol, "where are they? How do we stop them? Please…"

Osri's head was withdrawn, and she started sobbing again. "I only feel their wrath… their pain… I cannot end it myself…"

Her head then shot up abruptly to the sound of several footsteps behind them. Fen spun around at the same time, and all thoughts of legendaries were forgotten. His heart dropped to his feet.

Three huge Weavile stood in front of the cave's opening, with three more Sneasel at their sides, the smuggest-looking Fen recognised as the one who had led them here. The Weavile's long, white claws were raised at their sides, glowing in his tail light.

The broadest Weavile stepped forward and cast his eyes over their group with evident amusement. "Well, *thisss* took longer than I expected!" he said, his voice a slightly deeper version of the Sneasel's . "After the warning you were kind enough to be given, I expected any reasonable 'mon would scat straight out of Rai. Guess I overestimated your intelligence. After all," he went on, nodding to Osri on the floor, "what kind of idiots would come through all of this to see someone as insane as *her* ?"

He roared with the laughter, and the rest of the group did likewise. "Did she mutter the usual stuff about her *disasters,* about how much it *hurts* her? You at least knew not to get too close to her… she's a lost cause." He laughed again, then his eyes focused on Fen, who while now standing, still shook. The other 'mon's eyes followed their leader's. "Say, did she infect *you* now? I told you not to get too close… or did I overestimate you *again* ?"

"Leave him alone!" Ryu barked, standing beside Fen. "What's wrong with you all, can't you see how sick Osri is? Why don't you help her?"

Fen stared at Ryu in horror. *What are you doing? Don't make this guy angry, or we'll only get beaten sooner!*

The Weavile raised his eyelids at Ryu. "I've already told you why, fool. She's lost her mind."

"Only because y-you won't help!" Ryu hit back, but his quivering voice betrayed the intent of his words.

The Weavile, still smiling, started walking towards Ryu. However, he'd barely taken a step before Ryu yelped and jumped behind Fen, cowering in fear. The Weavile family found this hilarious, the small cave booming with their laughter.

"Never known a Fighter who can't even live up to their name," one of the Weavile spat at them.

"Makes you wonder how our bro even felt threatened by these idiots," another one laughed.

Yes, Fen thought, *it does. What's happened to you, Ryu?* Not daring to look away from the Weavile, he tried to push Ryu away from behind him, but heard the Riolu hiss in his ear just as he did:

"On the signal, attack and run."

Fen froze, still looking ahead. Had he imagined that? Could Ryu be planning something?

Ryu had now staggered beside him again, looking as terrified as before. While he whimpered, Fen turned towards him and their eyes met for the briefest of seconds. Fen knew his looks well enough to realise he hadn't misheard. Ryu was putting on an act.

Fen realised then that Zephia wasn't next to them at all. But where had she gone? And… what signal was he even waiting for?

One of the Weavile stepped forwards to stand between their two groups. "Hey look, the fools left some treasure on the floor for us!" she said, leaning over with her back to the rest of her group.

The only treasure Fen could see was the piece of fur that had been tied onto his flame. He had no idea why the Weavile found it so

interesting, or why she was blocking the view of it from the rest of her species-

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"What is it?" the lead Weavile asked, a hint of scepticism in his tone.

"It's pretty small… come closer and you'll see," the Weavile in front said teasingly.

Slowly, the lead Weavile approached her, with those behind him following. The Weavile who'd made the jibe about Ryu's type hung back, however.

"Hold on," she said, looking utterly bewildered. "What the - who the hell are you?! You look just like-"

"NOW!"

Fen was ready before the hunched Weavile had to shout. He leapt forwards and breathed the strongest flamethrower he could, benefitting from their enemies' staticness. As the Sneasel nearest him got a full body's worth of fire, he saw Ryu throw his palm into one Weavile and tackle another 'mon away from him, while Zephia dropped her illusion and spun, claws outstretched, into the lead Weavile before he could react.

Fen suddenly felt a claw slash into his side, breaking off his fire instantly. On all-fours, he instinctively kicked his two left limbs outward at the source, balancing on his right. Then he remembered Ryu's second instruction and bolted for the cave's entrance. He was relieved to see the other two had the same idea. Zephia led them back through the corridor, though they had no time to squeeze into the shortcut again.

They climbed up the steep bank they had fallen down, back through to the corridor Zephia had almost fallen from the edge of, then several more turnings that she had somehow remembered them taking.

The Weavile's footsteps followed them all the way - Fen resented his tail light's ever-presence - and just when he was getting convinced that Zephia had gotten them completely lost, the tunnel opened back out to daylight. They threw themselves out of the hole.

"Where now?" Ryu panted.

"Just away from here!" Zephia shouted back, already running again.

Fen tried to follow, but the biting cold suddenly made the pain in his side increase ten-fold. A few feet from the hole, he risked a look backwards to see the Weavile beginning to scramble out. *But on snow,* he realised, his four limbs barely keeping balance, *our legs have even less chance of outrunning them. They'll catch me in seconds, unless we find a way-*

"GROOAAAAAAHHH!"

Fen was sure that the earth moved. Unlike at Arkan, however, the sound shifting it came not from below them, but above. He looked up just in time to see a great, red-blue-and-grey beast flying over them. It threw back its head and sent a torrent of fire into the chasing Weavile and Sneasel, completely covering them with smoke. Fen heard shrieks of pain and cursing, and when the ash had cleared all six of them were lying in a heap, barely moving.

The Pokémon landed untidily in front Fen, Ryu and Zephia, its legs dragging in the snow and needing to plant its wings for stability. Only once it had lowered its body flat, revealing Faoz sitting at the base of its neck, did Fen realise it was the same Salamence that had crashed.

Faoz jumped down, gave the Dragon an affectionate rub on its muzzle, then turned to face them.

"Did you get an answer?" she asked.

Fen tried to speak, but his brain seemed to have been left a few steps behind him. After opening his mouth and it not making a sound, he managed one step towards Faoz before losing consciousness.

Fragile

Waking up felt… different.

His bed was too soft to be the inside of a rock, or the hardened mud of a dug-up hole. It actually… felt quite comfortable. And warm. It couldn't be warm. Weren't they on a freezing-cold mountain? They were still looking for… wait, no, they'd already found the Absol… it had told him about the disasters… he'd seen Groudon and Kyogre…

Memories of Darkrai's Knot suddenly flooded back to Fen, shocking him awake. Getting a wave of urgency, he sat up… but the world spun dizzyingly around him, and he slumped helplessly down again. It took a few slow minutes until he could manage the simple action.

He was in a room, indoors… Ryu and Zephia were here, lying on hay beds, and he had one too. Further back on a damp-looking blanket was Faoz, though one of her eyes opened at him as he watched.

"Faoz…" he tried saying, though what came out was more of a hoarse squeak.

Faoz grunted as she got up. "Take it easy," she said brusquely. "I'll get you a drink. Water okay?"

Fen's mouth did feel very dry, but that was the least of his worries… all he could think about was the vision he saw… the world in such danger…

"Where are we?" he squeaked.

"Sanguin Town, my house," Faoz replied, walking past him to grab a cup.

"W-what? How did we…"

"Calm down," Faoz said firmly, "and I'll tell you. Your body needs a rest; from what I've been told, it's been pushed to its absolute limits. Now… water…"

Faoz seemed to gargle briefly inside her mouth. Then with the cup in hand, she spat an untidy stream of water into it, passing the cup over when three-quarters full. Fen hesitantly accepted. The cup was steaming… he dipped an experimental finger inside.

"This water's hot," he said. *And you just… secreted it? No, that's the wrong word… uh…*

"I know," Faoz said. "Scalding, in fact. Thought you might appreciate it."

Fen stared blankly at her.

"Do you know what water is? Drink it!" she ordered. "It'll do you good."

Hoping that drinking straight from the mouth of a Water Pokémon was quite normal, Fen took a couple of sips. It did taste wonderful, warming and hydrating at the same time. He quickly downed the whole cup and set it aside. Though he still felt achy and rather odd about what he'd just done, the water re-energised him a little.

"Ryu and Zephia have filled me in on everything that's happened," Faoz told him. "Though there are still details they're unsure on. Specifically, what you apparently 'saw' in Darkrai's Knot."

Fen opened his mouth to spout more questions, but Faoz held a finned-arm up. "Slow down. Don't panic. Whatever you're worried about, there's nothing we can do for the time being."

"Why not?"

"Because you need rest!" Faoz snapped. "That goes for all of us, Shaice included. He carried us on his back for nearly a half-day, and

while you're not a Dragon, you should understand how exhausting that would be. The very earliest he can fly again is next dawn."

Fen's brain was starting to catch up. "We… flew back here? From Glyciak?"

"Yes," Faoz said. "You fell unconscious just as we arrived. The others were unanimous in wanting to get away from that place, and I wasn't going to argue."

"You slept through the whole flight, Fen," Ryu muttered to Faoz's side. He was lying down, evidently tired, but was grinning too. "It was *soooo* cool."

Fen gave him a half-smile in return. Then he turned back to Faoz, who noted his expression at once. "Fen, I understand that you're impatient, but unless we know *why*, there's no way we can help you. Could you tell us what it is?"

Fen paused, then nodded obligingly. "I'll try." Looking around the room, he saw that both Ryu and Zephia were now sitting up attentively. Neither of them knew what he'd seen either.

That vision… He tried concentrating on it, but it made his head ache almost immediately.

Faoz picked up on this, too. "If it's difficult to explain, try starting with the events preceding it. That might help us understand."

"Um… okay," Fen said weakly. "So, we were in Darkrai's Knot, trying to talk to Osri… but she was in so much pain, she could barely speak."

He felt worse the more he thought about it. To have such severe, uncontrollable suffering as she did… it fuelled his motivation to stop the disasters even more.

"Osri was the Absol you met?"

"Yeah," Ryu answered for him. He glanced at Fen. "Do you think she might've been the same one we saw all that time ago? And the same one Zephia saw? Absol *are* rare…"

Fen frowned; he hadn't even considered it. The Absol in Cheri Forest had certainly looked healthier than Osri. "I don't know," he said. "Hopefully there is only one, because there'd be fewer Pokémon in pain right now."

There was a brief silence at that. "Yes, well," Faoz said, "what *did* Osri manage to say?"

"She said that the movers of earth and sea were the ones causing her pain, and that their fighting was bringing nature out of balance." Every one of her words felt burned into his mind.

Faoz grunted, glancing at Ryu. "Groudon and Kyogre did build the continents, according to legend. It does sound like them."

"That's what I thought," Ryu said. "Hard to believe, though…"

"But you said their names, Groudon and Kyogre, Ryu," Fen continued, "and I got this sudden vision in my head…"

He explained what it was, the pain when he'd tried to keep seeing it, and how Osri had no answer as to how they could stop Groudon and Kyogre. There was a brief silence as the others took his story in.

"That's what you'd meant by 'seeing' them," Ryu said. "Sounds horrible."

Fen couldn't think of how to reply, but Faoz, frowning at him, spoke next. "This vision… I am curious. Do you know when it was from? The past, present, future…?"

"The past," Fen said at once.

Faoz raised her eyelids. "Are you sure?"

As Fen hesitated, she continued. "Listen, having visions of the future is possible, if only for the most advanced and devoted of Psychics. But having visions of the *past*, a past you have seemingly not seen yourself… I have never heard of such phenomena. And I've met plenty of Psychics.

"Furthermore, Ryu told me about the things you call 'emotion attacks', how they convinced you that the weather was a problem. Clearly, they were telling some form of truth, but this just adds to my confusion. It seems that, assuming you *did* see the past, you have two extraordinary, unheard-of Psychic abilities. The fact that you cannot control them seems almost trivial, because they should *not be possible* for you, regardless of… well, any circumstances." She looked at him, all but saying: *'Can you explain yourself?'*

Fen sighed, looking at the floor. *Hardly surprising that she figured out something was up with me. Well, no point wasting time. If she's going to help us, it's probably imperative that she understands…*

"I don't know how these things are possible either," he said, "but think I know why they happened to *me.* There's a few things you need to know. I'm not native to Kyunn. I woke up in Cheri Forest, the same day I met Ryu and saw that Absol. I had no memories of anything in my life preceding that day, except for three things. One was my name, second was that I lived in a place called Hoenn, and third was that I used to be a human.

"Now, I…" He stopped, noticing with alarm the anger that had flashed across Faoz's face. Her expression gradually cooled in the silence that followed. But her voice was still unnaturally quiet when she spoke.

"Do… continue."

Fen started again, trying not to read too much into her reaction. "I've suspected for a while that I'm connected to the natural disasters: that I woke up on the same day as the Absol's warning and have these emotion attacks seem to prove it. I know that the place I was from,

Hoenn, was populated by both humans and Pokémon; and in the vision I had, I saw people - *human* people - running away. So, given I lost my memories, I think that the vision wasn't strictly a *vision,* but a glimpse of my past. Which means that I must have been looking at Hoenn, and that's where Groudon and Kyogre must be right now. To stop the disasters, that's where we'll have to go."

Faoz was wringing her paws together very tightly. "I… I did not expect this," she murmured. "You two," she said suddenly, looking between Ryu and Zephia. "What do you think?"

"O-of what? Everything he said?" Ryu stammered. "I mean, I know Fen's telling the truth about himself… He wouldn't lie-"

"Of course he wouldn't lie!" Faoz shouted. "That… that would be insanity!" She sounded angrier than Fen had ever heard. Glancing frantically between them all, she continued. "None of you have any idea, do you? You don't know the history of this place… why humans are never spoken of… nothing…"

No one dared respond. Eventually, she got up and started pacing the small room.

"I suppose I should tell you the story I know," she said. "This was told by Dragons from the Zarrac Highlands. There may be 'mon other than the Dragons who witnessed it happen, but by now I think the knowledge is scarce.

"Long before any of us were born, a group of humans arrived at Kyunn by sea. There are different theories as to why this island appealed to them. Some believe they wished to harness the rare seeds and fruits that grow here; others think they saw it merely as an arbitrary land to conquer. Nevertheless, they made two visits. On the first, they came alone but didn't make it far. The native Pokémon saw these humans as hostile and were easily able to scare them away. But the humans, realising that Kyunn couldn't be simply walked onto and claimed, soon returned in far greater numbers. On this second visit, all of them carried their own Pokémon. They had been trained

under the humans like slaves; made to follow their master's every command, right to the point of unconsciousness.

"These 'mon were immediately confronted by the native Dragons. The Dragons urged them to back down, warning that their lives would be in danger should they try and fight. But the human-trained 'mon, refusing to disobey their masters, did not heed their advice. A war ensued, closer fought than the Dragons expected; the humans had multiple Pokémon each, some of which had been trained to terrifying extremes. But the humans eventually realised they were fighting a losing battle. They took back the few uninjured 'mon they had left and fled with them, while those more seriously hurt were left on the battlefield to die. And, to my knowledge, humans have not been seen on Kyunn since."

She stopped pacing and turned to them. "You see Fen, I *believe* that you were a human. Simply because there's no way any 'mon would want to associate with them. Do you understand?"

Fen had hardly considered why Kyunn was so devoid of not only humans, but the knowledge of them too. In that regard, Faoz's story made perfect sense. But he hated it.

He wanted to say that she had it wrong, that humans did not treat Pokémon like slaves, that they shouldn't be viewed as such an enemy to Kyunn. But there was nothing to prove this with, for he could remember infuriatingly little about how humans and Pokémon interacted. He knew that Pokémon were rarely allowed to roam freely in residential towns. That if they weren't well trained, they would be thrown out into the wild. Yet anything more specific eluded him. He had Zephia's story, too, but that was even less supportive.

But, forgetting all that - what did Faoz's tale even have to do with him? It had happened generations ago. He knew that he was not like those people. He was not responsible for anything.

"I'm not sure what you're getting at," he said to Faoz. "Do you think I'm evil now? That I'll force you into following some scheme I have

planned?"

"No," Faoz replied, gritting her teeth. "I can clearly see - and your friends, I'm sure, would agree - that you're not anything like those humans. It would be short-sighted to judge you on your ancestors' history."

"Right!" Ryu added. "We know you're not evil!"

Though Faoz's assumptions about his ancestors irked him, Fen was hugely grateful for her support. Zephia did not say anything, but he didn't need to confirm what her views were.

Faoz continued. "I'm not worried about you, Fen. But I am worried about where you want to go. This human-inhabited land."

Fen realised the problem the moment she said it. Despite wanting to get to Hoenn ever since he recognised the name, he had forgotten that, by every physical definition, he was a Pokémon. Not a human. He couldn't walk around as he pleased; none of them could.

Still, that could be worked around. It would have to be. He couldn't ignore the vision he'd seen.

"It won't be easy," he said carefully. "You may well get hurt, even though I'll do everything I can to protect us. But look: worrying about humans is *nothing* compared to what else we're up against. Groudon and Kyogre are out there! If we're to have any chance of stopping them, we *must* go to Hoenn. There's no other option. And we need to go as soon as possible."

Faoz hesitated for a few seconds. "I understand," she said. "And I am willing to trust your judgement. However, how *do* you plan to stop Groudon and Kyogre? We need to go to this *place*, sure, but I thought the Absol couldn't tell you how to stop them…"

"Well - no, she couldn't," Fen said, avoiding Faoz's piercing gaze. *She asks some seriously tough questions. I guess I should be glad*

that somebody's *flagging them up…* "Assuming that we can't defeat them in battle, obviously, there was one way that I immediately thought of. I wasn't confident in it, because… well, for the same reason that I never considered Groudon and Kyogre to be causing the disasters. That way would be… to find Rayquaza."

The idea went down better than he expected; no one gawped at him, or laughed, or shook their heads dismissively.

"I didn't wanna say, but… I was wondering that too," Ryu said.

"As was I," Faoz said. "You know the myths, then."

"How do you know them?" Fen asked.

"Well, supposedly long ago, Groudon and Kyogre fought a war over the land and sea. It raged for many moons. Rayquaza, the ruler of the sky, eventually appeared and calmed their fighting, before sealing them into the earth for eternity."

Huh. That's exactly how I know it. Suggests that there was at least some truth involved…

"Right," Fen said. "For some reason, Rayquaza hasn't stopped them this time. It must be sleeping or something. All we need to do is find it, tell it what's happening, and it'll resolve their conflict again."

The 'mon's expressions around him became a little more doubtful. "I know it sounds like a longshot," he added. "Once we're there, the humans in Hoenn will know more than us about what's happening. And I *know* that Hoenn is where we need to be." That, he could say with conviction.

Faoz considered for a long moment. "We have nothing better to go on," she conceded. "But there's one more problem."

"What?"

"Well… *where* is this 'Hoenn'? Do you know?"

"I…" Fen paused. "Zephia, do you know?"

"Not exactly," Zephia growled. "I remember… where the place the Pidgeot dropped me looked like. I could probably direct you to Hoenn from there… but I have no idea where that place is."

"Who is… 'the Pidgeot'?" Faoz asked sceptically.

"The 'mon that carried me onto this island," Zephia said impatiently. "She's gone now. Long story."

"I… see," Faoz said. "Well, if we're confined to Kyunn, it shouldn't be too hard to work out where you were… What did this area look like? Was it near the sea?"

"Yeah… there was a little sand on the shore, but not much."

"What was beyond that?" Faoz made a move for their map of Kyunn, but met Fen and Ryu's eyes as she did so. "Hm… We need to work this out, and I need to talk to Shaice about our plans. You two don't need to stay with us."

"What about Shaice?" Fen asked. "Will he want to fly us there?"

"I'm confident that I can persuade him," Faoz said. "We've known each other for a long time."

Fen nodded. "Okay. What should we do in the meantime?"

"Well - here." Faoz passed her almost-empty bag to them; it was significantly bigger than Ryu's. "We'll need to stock up on supplies before leaving. Normally I would just take foods that the chefs here aren't using, but that isn't possible right now. Go to the market and get as much food as you can carry. Also, if Scout is around, you have my permission to buy anything he's selling; it'll all be useful somehow."

"We don't have any poké-" Ryu began, but Faoz held an arm up for him to stop. She looked very concentrated on something, which Fen

couldn't understand until he noticed the yellow sac around her body sag, as if deflating. When it had almost flattened against her fur, Faoz dug one paw underneath where the sac hung around her neck. She pulled out a small key. Then she scurried over to a corner of the room, where a wooden chest was sitting resolutely.

"High security," she joked, inserting the key into the chest's metal lock. She opened it only for a second, pulling out an old, drawstring bag and chucking it to them. "Take a look."

Ryu cautiously peered inside, and his eyes instantly lit up in the glow of gold coins. "Whoa, this is… so much poké!" he exclaimed. "I… we can buy *anything* !"

"Yes, there should be enough to buy all you need." Faoz smiled. "As I say, food is the priority, but pay Scout a visit too. Just… don't show him your poké *before* you start negotiating," she added slyly.

Fen did find it odd how Faoz could trust them with what appeared to be some serious riches, but he and Ryu - *especially* Ryu - weren't complaining.

"Well, I'm ready for this now," Ryu said excitedly. Being the taller 'mon, he fit Faoz's bag around his shoulders and passed his own, smaller bag to Fen.

"Zephia, you come with me to talk to Shaice," Faoz said. Zephia just nodded. "We'll meet you back here, all being well. Oh, and don't worry about food for Shaice. He can find his own."

"Gotcha," Ryu said. "See ya later."

Fen was about to point out that they'd all be leaving through the same door, but then Faoz went over to the window on the room's opposite side and dove through it like a hoop. Zephia gave Fen and Ryu an ambiguous glance before following her out.

"We came in through the window," Ryu told him helpfully. "It leads straight out of town, which is where Shaice is sleeping. More practical than him landing in the middle of a street."

"I'd bet," Fen said without humour. He moved towards the door. "It's weird that Faoz said she couldn't borrow food from the chefs… what could be-"

Entering the main room of Faoz's building, his question was instantly answered. The place was *swarming* with Pokémon. It seemed as if the room contained nothing else; the desk and bulletin board that Faoz had in place before were both gone. And unlike at Arkan, where the crowd of 'mon were only Fires, here there was an infinite variety of colours, shapes and sizes.

"Oh… Faoz mentioned this," Ryu said. "Basically, the bad weather destroyed a lot of homes, too many for the builders to rebuild within the day. Also, with the damage being done to other habitats, lots of 'mon are migrating here because they see it as a safer place than wherever they were living. They all need somewhere to sleep, so…"

"This got turned into… some kind of safehouse," Fen finished. His impatience to reach Hoenn was stirred even more at this sight of disarray. He quickly barged a path through the packed bodies, ignoring various murmurs of discontent, and stepped outside into the town.

The scene here was hardly any different. There were Pokémon all over the streets, many of whom appeared to be still be searching for cover. The town had always been an unorganised mess of houses, but its current state looked more like a half-demolished building site. About a third of the houses Fen remembered were still in good shape. Most of the rest were either damaged or in a state of rebuilding, along with a few piles of rubble that seemed to have been plain abandoned.

Faoz mentioned that the town had been suffering, but I didn't expect it to be this bad. There's not enough shelter, everyone looks like

they're expecting another disaster… no wonder they all seem so miserable… If his muscles weren't still aching, Fen would've run to the market in his haste to escape here. He had to settle for a brisk walk.

When they reached the market itself it was, in contrast, almost deserted. Many stalls were completely empty, and those that were active - the item storage, the food stall and the bag shop looked the only ones - were devoid of customers.

The only Pokémon stood in the square other than the shopkeepers were a Blastoise and Kangaskhan, both alone. Ryu soon learned from the grumpy-looking Blastoise - even though Fen hardly cared for an explanation - that they had volunteered to guard against theft. Poor crop yields had led to food shortages, which in turn created a hike in prices. As more 'mon migrated to the town, these problems only got worse, eventually resulting in an outbreak of stealing from those going hungry. The town was now working to supply food for those who couldn't afford it, but Fen could guess from the Blastoise's pessimistic manner that this wasn't easy going.

The Vigoroth's food stall was only manned by one of them, rather than the three that Fen remembered scampering around before. With some fast negotiation - not helped by Ryu raising their sack of poké and asking how much it would cost to buy *everything* the Vigoroth had - they came out with Faoz's bag stuffed full of a mixture of berries and nuts. It would supposedly last four Pokémon for three days.

"Looks like Scout's still around," Ryu said cheerfully, pointing out the hut hanging awkwardly at the edge of the square. It had some notable changes; the fake berries that had been on display were gone, and the old canopy over it had been replaced with a sturdier, thatched-wood construction. The main distinguishing factor was Scout himself, lying in his favoured sleeping position in front of his hut's door.

Fen already felt doubtful. Unless Scout had been foraging recently, it was likely that he'd be sold out of any good berries. Seeds were another option, but they were risky and *very* situational…

"Hey." Ryu suddenly stopped. "What's going on over there?"

Though Fen yearned to ignore the distraction, preventing a twitch of his right ear was impossible. Some kind of ruckus seemed to be coming from that direction, but there were already taller Pokémon crowding ahead of him, making it impossible to see.

"It's probably nothing," he muttered. "Let's just talk to Scout and get back…"

But before he could, the Linoone himself had clambered over his counter and was standing on his hind legs, facing the noise.

"Alright lads," he said, nodding as they approached. "Some disagreement going down in the square… seems to be one every day now…"

"D'you know what it's about?" Ryu asked.

Yawning, Scout craned his neck even higher. "Can't hear what they're saying from here, but looks like ol' Ferri's caught up in it again. Look, I love the guy, but a Furret can only do so much… especially given all the migration problems we've been having…"

"Scout!" Fen almost shouted. The Linoone looked down at him. "We need items, alright? Can you-"

He froze, as a harsh cry cut through to his senses like a needle. His impatience evaporated, turned to fear. The cry was unmistakable, even if he hadn't heard it sound so desperate before… *Cyan!*

He bolted towards the sound, ignoring Ryu's confused shouts after him, and ducked under larger bodies in the crowd until he had a clear view of the square. It was clearly split into two sides. On one, at

least a dozen strong-looking 'mon stood in a triangle formation. An enraged Ursaring was at its head, but just ahead of him was a Nidorino, crouched with his horn tilting outwards.

On the other side were a handful of Mightyena, and in the middle of them was a Furret, who had to be Ferri, the town's mayor. He was cowering feebly behind the back of the one 'mon who Fen had identified immediately: Cyan. The Quilava was on all-fours, canines bared, growling furiously. From her and the Nidorino's identical body shapes, it looked like they'd just exchanged attacks.

"I don't care where you came from!" Cyan spat. "If you don't act with some *decency*, you don't deserve to stay here!"

" *Decency* ?!" the Ursaring boomed back, loud enough to make Fen's sensitive ears ring. "It was your *mayor* who wanted to push us away! Not enough shelter, not enough builders… *pathetic* excuses! Perhaps he doesn't trust us, worries our group is too powerful for him to control…"

"No! That's - that's crazy thinking!" Cyan said, eyes wide. "If you just… use your heads, please-!"

She didn't have time to finish. A Medicham leapt out from behind the Ursaring, a crackling, blue ball of energy between its hands. The ball grew twice the size of its head, then it raised its hands, gave a vicious cry and hurled the sphere into Cyan.

"NO!" Fen cried out, but the ball's deafening explosion drowned him out. A bright blue light momentarily blinded him; once it cleared, the square had turned to chaos. Suddenly, Pokémon on each side were fighting without restraint, snarling and tackling and biting each other, their combined attacks creating a terrifying sea of colours. Fen was vaguely aware of the crowd around him fleeing; some were howling and screaming about it. But he didn't move. Cyan was hurt!

After the opening rush of attacks, 'mon started facing up to one another individually. With the sheer number of battles, it became

hard to tell who was on each side. It also caused the brawl to spread out, moving beyond the small square towards them-

Ryu cried something next to him. Before he could react, Fen was tackled to the ground, just in time for a purple blur to whistle over their heads. As he and Ryu scrambled up, the blur stopped and turned back to them. It was the Nidorino, looking delirious with anger, its eyes unfocused. It launched itself wildly at Ryu. Ryu partially swerved away, taking a claw to his left side, but retaliated with a flying kick that sent the Nidorino skidding further from the square, down towards the market.

Fen was about to follow the attack, but noticed a flash of red and blue in his periphery. There he saw Cyan. She was in front of a rickety wooden house, struggling to get up from the floor. The Rhydon she was fighting looked coldly at her and was about to kick her further into the dirt before she scrambled away. She was alone and, judging by her shaking limbs, was in a pretty desperate state.

Almost before Fen considered the idea, he found himself galloping frantically in her direction. He leapt three times his height over a white-and-purple 'mon, then just managed to duck under a Tauros' headbutt crossing him. He was headed for the Rhydon, who was yet to notice him. He drew nearer, readied fire in his mouth to release… then a Primeape appeared from nowhere and stuck out its leg.

Running full speed, the trip threw Fen spinning into the air. He watched himself fly helplessly past the Rhydon, about to crash into the ground… but instead, he hit something warm and soft.

Cyan quickly threw him off her midriff. Having risen unsteadily onto two legs to catch him, she quickly dropped to four to avoid falling over entirely. While Fen was still dazed, she sent a flamethrower towards the Rhydon, making it recoil a few stomps.

Cyan turned one eye towards him. "What are you doing?" she demanded, breathing heavily.

"Trying to help you!" Fen replied, though he was panting equally as hard.

Cyan looked at him disbelievingly. "Right, well-" she glanced at the Rhydon again. Its horned skull was lowered threateningly. "-there's a better chance with two of us. Fire attacks won't be the most effective here, but it's all we've got. You ready?"

Fen hesitated before giving a weak "Ready" back. He already felt beaten and hadn't even faced an attack. *Faoz told me earlier that my body needed a rest… what was I thinking, trying to fight? I should be in Hoenn, not here!*

Cyan started running, despite her evident fatigue. Once within reach of the Rhydon's body, she jumped sideways and - to Fen's astonishment - fired a mid-air flamethrower at it. The Rhydon seemed ready, ducking its body into a half-ball to protect itself. Emerging from the smoke, its head armour looked slightly singed, but it didn't seem to affect its energy.

As Cyan landed, it lowered its great head and jabbed its horn repeatedly at her. It wasn't the fastest attack, but Cyan's body seemed to move in slow motion, and she took three painful hits. Then the Rhydon's head turned and its eyes were suddenly on Fen; in the distraction and his tiredness, he'd forgotten why he was there. He remembered far too late.

The Rhydon's back legs flexed, and it lifted itself briefly into the air. When it landed the ground violently gave way underneath Fen. Flat on his stomach, he felt like the energy in his body was being crushed out of him. He heard screams behind him, then footsteps and a cracking sound. Pieces of wood rained over his lower half. The house behind him must have collapsed.

Cyan cried out his name. He didn't know what she did to hold the Rhydon off, but when she appeared, she seemed more concerned with something small next to him. His head was swimming; he couldn't see clearly.

"Listen, you'll only hurt yourself if you keep fighting. Get somewhere safe. I'll hold this 'mon off until we get more numbers. And… take this, whatever it is…"

She thrust an object into his arms and his eyes suddenly focused, lighting up in recognition. *The seed pouch… I'm wearing Ryu's bag! It must've fallen out of there. And something's inside…*

Sure enough, ripping it open revealed the one, bright-red violent seed they had left. But as soon as the idea entered his mind, another part of him objected. *You don't even know what this seed does! It's far too risky to try now!*

Then he looked up and saw Cyan and the Rhydon trading blows again, the Quilava wincing with every movement. A glance around showed a number of the Mightyena on the floor, beaten, and the Ursaring was regrouping with some of its victorious allies. Those in houses close to the square were fleeing from them, screaming in terror.

This can't happen… the town's already falling apart… if those 'mon win, there'll be nothing left of it…

He grabbed the seed and bit into it.

Dangerous situations for Fen were often like balancing two states of mind: conscious thought and instincts. With his thoughts he could work out the best possible action, though this had to happen quickly, given the speed Pokémon moved. If that wasn't viable, there were his instincts, but they were like a wild beast in comparison, almost always screaming *attack* to him. There had been times when, on instinct alone, he had produced attacks well beyond his conscious limits and understanding. But his urges were often reckless, thus he usually ignored them.

Now he felt like, impossibly, someone had turned both states of his mind up to maximum. He was perfectly aware of his surroundings, almost too aware; the world looked unusually sharp and focused. But

he wasn't fatigued anymore, or even afraid of his situation. He was confident. And he had an abundance of energy, so much that he felt sizzling with it.

Cyan was looking at him curiously. Then when she spoke, the words seemed to float beyond his understanding. Not that it mattered; *he* knew what needed to be done. This Rhydon didn't stand a chance.

"Get out of the way!" he told her. Strangely, she jolted suddenly away from him at this, but then leapt towards the Rhydon and puffed plumes of black smoke into its face. It was blinded. This was his chance to attack.

He didn't try to summon fire. This wasn't the right opponent; Cyan's attacks had proven that. No… what this Rhydon needed was a *punch* . Yes. That would crush its grey body armour, its defences, without doubt.

The Rhydon wasn't more than 20 paces away, but he only needed five to reach top speed. After 10, his feet left the ground and he pulled back his arm. All the while, his body was impossibly gathering more and more energy. He embraced the sensation, demanding more of it; he'd never felt so brilliant.

His arm swung forwards, but all he could see now was a bright light, so intense that he had to shut his eyes. He didn't care what this was - the Rhydon would still be in front of him, too slow to dodge his fist.

Finally, he felt the satisfaction of his fist breaking into the 'mon's body, and the white light around him cleared. Eager to inspect his damage, he saw his arm-

His arm.

Every muscle in his body seemed to freeze at once. He stopped breathing. He fell from the air, onto his stomach, which forced him to gasp for breath. He reopened his eyes and moved them very slowly, very carefully, towards his left arm again.

It was *huge* ; at least the double the width it had been, and longer too. His fingers not only looked like they had been inflated but had changed colour, from yellow to tan. A gold ring of fur had appeared out of nowhere on his upper arm. *Both* arms, as he turned to check; his non-punching arm had been affected in the same way.

Wait, punching *? Since when have I ever punched anything without fire? What… what did that seed do to me?!*

He lifted his head up to check where the Rhydon was. Instead, he found the whole square seemingly frozen in time. The fighting had stopped, and every single Pokémon's attention was silent, their attentions… fixed solely on *him* .

The Rhydon's head was slumped on the floor. Fen saw its eyes flicker open, looking at him, but it didn't show any desire to fight back, or any anger… it looked wonderous, admiring. Almost happy for him. Other 'mon had the same expression. And those who had fled the square were running *back* now, and they were stopping too, just to look at him… it didn't make any sense…

"Fen? Fen!"

Hearing a voice he could understand - and Cyan's, no less - relaxed him significantly. She appeared on all fours in front of him, with an odd expression he couldn't figure out, and lowered her voice so only he could hear.

"Hey, how are you feeling? All okay?"

Uh… Fen looked down at his arms and shook his head. "I feel-"

He paused. His voice felt about an octave deeper. He tried again.

"I… I…" His voice's new register refused to change. "I feel really strange," he said eventually, giving up.

Cyan examined him. "What did that seed do? Where did you get it?"

He frowned. *I remember Scout being very clear on what the seeds looked like, but as for their specific function…*

"Scout gave it to us," he said. "He called it a violent seed, and said something about using it in desperate times only."

Cyan groaned. "Of course it was Scout…"

"What's wrong with that?"

Cyan shook her head. "You scared me for a moment," she said. "When you ate the seed, you just… I don't know, turned crazy. Before you went for the Rhydon, you growled at *me* like I was an enemy!"

"Huh? Before the Rhydon… I just told you to get out of the way…"

"No! That might've been your intent, but you *growled* ! And not just that, the look in your eyes was, well… you looked ready to murder someone!"

Thinking back, Fen found his memories of those moments had a weird haziness over them. In that haze, he still thought he had told her to get out of the way. But it was strange that he hadn't been able to understand her…

"Do you feel normal now? You don't want to attack anyone?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Fen said impatiently. "Cyan, what-"

"Alright then!" Cyan gave a sigh of relief. "You're acting normally. I guess the seed wore off after you evolved. Not *such* a bad trade-off, really." She grinned. "C'mon, I'll give you an arm up. I remember how confusing this was…"

I… evolved… As her words sunk in, his highly tensed muscles loosened. *That makes so much sense!*

An array of emotions hit him. There was happiness, obviously; he could tell that was his instinctual side being pleased with itself. Relief, that nothing bad had happened to him.

Confusion: a lot of it. How *could* this have happened? For one, he'd only been living in this body for three weeks. It took most Pokémon years to evolve, so how had he achieved it so quickly? Additionally, evolving had drastically changed his body from what it was before - the second time that had happened to him. What did that mean for him as a former human? How much of himself - his old self, at least - could still be around now?

Even ignoring this, there was a lurking impatience. As interesting as it was, entering a brawl and accidently evolving was not what they were here for. He and Ryu still needed to visit Scout, get back to Faoz and…

Wait a minute… Ryu… He looked around the crowd again, but he hadn't been imagining things.

Where's Ryu?

What Matters

"Fen, you're gonna need to help yourself a little. You're probably heavier than me now."

Cyan's voice brought him back to reality, and he felt her arm around his shoulders. Getting to his feet wasn't difficult - he didn't feel at all short on energy - but he realised when standing why the arm was necessary. The ground felt impossibly small and far away, making him sway on his feet. Everything seemed to have shrunk… he and Cyan were nose-to-nose with each other.

Though his mind was still on Ryu, he couldn't resist inspecting himself. In addition to his larger proportions, the pale fur on his stomach, hands and feet had become a light brown. Something white was blocking his view slightly; he felt around his neck, where a ruff of fur much like Zephia's had appeared. That felt nice. On his head, the sorry excuse for hair that he'd been carrying had largely disappeared. Only a little bit of 'loose fur', as he'd come to think of it, remained. What pleased him most, though, was that his head seemed the only part of him not to have grown at all; it was probably a reasonable size for him now.

Underneath his fur, he could feel his fire store burning stronger and hotter than before - that didn't surprise him. But there was also a new energy present, one that concentrated itself more in his limbs than his stomach. It gave him a strange urge to punch something again.

In response to him standing, a few Pokémon, mostly Fires, broke into the same sort of applause that he'd been greeted with at Arkan; a mixture of cries, claps and cheers. Some of the square joined in, but a significant proportion didn't. Then the Ursaring leader stepped towards the centre of the now-ruined square, holding an apologetic paw up, and everyone went quiet. He waited for the rest of his group to join him before speaking.

"On behalf of all the north-west, I apologise." His voice seemed unnaturally calm compared to the first time he'd spoken. "We are tired, bruised, and allowed our frustrations to take over us. We will-" he nodded at Ferri, who was still shaking slightly, "follow your mayor's wishes, and wait here for shelter to become viable. We will also voluntarily repair the damage that our fight inflicted. Again, our apologies."

He signalled to Fen. "Had it not been for this 'mon, I worry to think where we might have ended up. So thank you, Monferno. And congratulations, of course."

Monferno. I do like the sound of it much more than Chimchar…

As the Ursaring walked over to Ferri, Fen was only vaguely listening to Cyan in his ear. "Hey, congrats! Can't say I expected this so soon after we met… but I guess you've come a long way since asking me how to breathe fire, huh?" She chuckled happily.

So I evolved… and it had the power to make everyone stop and notice, and realise that this fighting was self-destructive. Makes sense for it to be such a special event… many Pokémon only evolve once in their lives…

"Fen?" Cyan gave him a nudge with the arm around his shoulders. "You there? I think Ferri wants to see you. By the way, where were you for so long? Word just arrived of what happened at Arkan, did you reach there? It sounded so awful…"

I should be happy about this… the town will survive a little longer now. But even so… those 'mon's savage behaviour was caused by the disasters, I'm sure of it. Which means something like this is bound to happen again. We don't have much time… we need to get to Hoenn, right now!

An alert area of brain reminded him that someone was speaking. He jerked his head towards Cyan. "Uh, sorry. Was distracted."

He intended to follow what she said and walk swiftly towards Ferri, but stopped after one step, feeling the strangest sensation on his back. Putting a tentative arm behind him, he yelped as he felt a solid, muscular object there. Pulling the object around him - amazed for that to even be possible - he stared. He had a tail now. No longer just a small extension of his back, but a *proper* tail. And it was on fire!

He suddenly wanted to try swishing it left and right, but fought off the excited impulse. That could wait. The tail aside, walking wasn't much different from how he remembered, just… *bigger* .

He wasn't listening much to Ferri either, only catching snippets of repeated thanks and words about 'this wonderful town'. He remembered that Ryu's fight with the Nidorino had been sliding towards the market, so started in that direction as soon as Ferri had finished.

"Fen?"

He mentally slapped himself; how many times was he going to blank Cyan? "Uh… yeah?" he said awkwardly, turning his head. "Sorry, I, uh, need to find Ryu. We got split up."

"Oh." Cyan glanced to her left, towards where she lived. "I need to check on my family too. They should be fine, our house is a way away, but… you know…"

"Yeah." An awkward pause followed, then something she said suddenly flashed through Fen's mind. "Did you mention something about Arkan?"

"Huh? Oh… earlier today, a group of about ten Fires arrived here. They were dead on their feet, but they had enough energy to say that Arkan basically… erupted, and everyone there had to flee for their lives. Did you see it happen?"

"I… heard about it," Fen lied, too impatient to tell a story now. "Do you remember the species that arrived? Was there a Flareon or Fletchinder among them?"

"There were a lot of different species… not sure about a Flareon." Cyan frowned. "And a Fletchinder? That's unlikely… birds don't tend to live in grounded places like this…"

"Oh."

"I can ask about the Flareon. What's their name?"

Fen hesitated before saying, "Leo." It was pointless, really; Cyan wouldn't get back to him before they left the town.

Cyan sensed his disappointment, though. "Look, if Leo *didn't* turn up today, he's probably on his way. Those 'mon that arrived were only the first from Arkan. There'll be plenty more."

Though Fen found her optimism admirable, he couldn't view things the same way. *How can I, after what I saw?*

"Fen, I'll see you later, alright?" Cyan said. "It'd be cool to catch up on things sometime. Have a good evening." With a kind, reassuring smile to him, she began walking away.

But it's not just Leo and Charro I won't see again… it's everyone here. This whole island. I might never be coming back! Cyan… why was I so rude to her?! Once we leave, I'll never get to-

"Wait, Cyan!"

Now she turned awkwardly, looking expectant.

"Uh… bad time and all, but… could you… give me a hug, please?"

The look of restrained laughter Cyan gave then made him wish that evolution had removed his mouth. "So polite," she quipped. "Well, it's your special day, so sure I'll give you a hug, ya big hugger."

Their equal height made this even better than his first hug with her, his arms able to fit perfectly around the space between her lit flame spots. The warmth of her, the softness of fur… he fixed them firmly in his mind, desperate not to forget it.

Once they said goodbye for a second time, he managed to regather his thoughts towards Ryu, and started down a passageway connecting the square and the town market. Hearing shouts in the distance, he doubled his pace, testing out his body's four-legged gallop for the first time. But when he reached the market, it was a scene of wreckage.

The first thing to notice was that Scout's hut - what used to be his hut - had been reduced to a pile of blackened rubble. Ryu and the Nidorino were standing a few metres from the remains, bodies charred. Ryu looked worst off, with his black and non-black portions of fur impossible to tell apart. Opposite them was Scout, but it was difficult to tell how bad his fur was behind the Blastoise pinning him to the floor. Scout was screaming incoherent curses, trying to wriggle and claw his way off the Water 'mon despite the clear mismatch in strength.

A crowd had gathered here, too; the few shopkeepers around combined with a few 'mon Fen supposed had just been attracted by Scout's wailing. Ryu glanced up as Fen came closer, and he looked miserable. His eyes showed no interest in Fen, and he quickly turned away to re-observe the Scout situation.

Fen froze up for a second, wondering if this could implausibly be the wrong Riolu, before deducing a more likely explanation. He had to almost shout above Scout. "Ryu - it's me!"

Ryu blinked at him for a few seconds. The moment that it seemed to dawn on him what had happened, he dropped his head, then turned back to the Blastoise.

"Can I go?" he asked weakly. Scout's flailing was starting to lose energy, though his narrowing eyes were still glaring in Ryu's

direction.

"Probably best if you do," the Blastoise grunted back, waving him away without a glance.

Ryu cast one last look at the hut's remains, then picked up Faoz's bag from the floor and hurried over to Fen, leading them out of the market.

Fen expected Ryu to speak first, but he just trudged forwards with his head down. "Ryu, are you okay? Your fur… what happened back there?"

"Isn't it obvious? I messed up again. All of Scout's stuff is gone, he's gone insane…"

"How did you mess up? You couldn't have burned down the shop…"

"I don't know how I did it," Ryu grumbled. "Me and that Nidorino were fighting, like everyone else was, and we lost track of where we were. We ended up in the market square, in front of Scout's hut, not that I realised that, and the 'Rino tackled me into the back of it. I crashed through its wall into a back room, then… it just exploded!"

"Can you… explain what the explosion was like?" Fen said. "It can't have been down to you…"

"Well, it felt like I'd been pushed into an inferno, it hurt that much. I saw the space in front of me go up in flames, and I threw myself out through another wall. In like, three seconds, the whole place was reduced to what it is now."

"An inferno…" Fen mused, wondering if it was some crazy anti-burglary feature Scout had installed. "Oh… maybe it was blast seeds? When I used one, it produced a pretty huge flame. If you crashed through the wall, you could've hit a whole box of them, with enough force to break them all, and…" He looked at Ryu's charred body again. "It probably would've done that."

Ryu huffed unhappily. "Scout didn't work that one out. The moment I crawled out of the hut, he jumped on me, absolutely mad, like he wanted to kill me. The 'Rino and Blastoise pulled him away. After that, and given the 'Rino was nearly as burnt as me, we stopped fighting each other. Plus, we'd heard 'mon saying someone had evolved and that the main brawl had stopped, so there was no point."

Fen expected Ryu to follow up with a question about him, but when the Riolu didn't he asked, "Did everything in our bag survive?"

Ryu sighed. "Sure, it wasn't set alight, but…" He looked at the floor shamefully. "All that's inside is normal food and a ton of poké that can't buy anything. Hardly worth saving."

Fen knew that was over-dramatic, but it was hard to deny how much of a blow losing Scout's items were. He'd already felt like they were walking into the eye of a storm.

"How'd you evolve then?" Ryu asked abruptly.

Fen quickly explained the fight with the Rhydon. Ryu kept his head down all the while.

"So, you think *all* you did was eat the seed?" Ryu said.

"I'm not sure what set it off. The seed certainly did something, but…"

Ryu grumbled something distinctively negative sounding.

"Is something wrong?" Fen asked.

Ryu shook his head, paws balled. "It's just… it's not fair! Why did *you* evolve? When I met you, you barely knew how to even attack, and barely a moon has passed since then, but now… now you're probably stronger than me!"

"Ryu, I don't know how-"

"Oh, you don't know *anything* !" Ryu said angrily. "That makes it even worse! Like, I could *tell* that you were close to evolving. You didn't realise that, huh? When you said your attacks were tiring you too quickly, and I saw you scratching your fur after every fight… those were clear signs. Not that I've ever had them…"

"You knew I was close?" Fen said. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Who knows. I guess part of me didn't want to believe it was true. It didn't make sense, given how little experience you'd had…"

Fen almost started reassuring him, but then changed his mind. He stopped walking and grabbed Ryu's shoulder. "Ryu, you need to drop this."

Ryu pulled himself away from the grip just as fast. "Drop what?" he snapped back.

"This stupid obsession you have with evolving! Do you realise how meaningless it sounds right now? With the danger we're in? What's at stake?"

"Hmph," Ryu muttered. "Dropping it isn't that simple…"

"Really? Sounds simple to me."

"No, it's not!" Ryu cried. "You don't understand! I wish I *didn't* have to worry about it!"

The sudden hurt in his voice made Fen pause. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I know this mindset of wanting to evolve so badly is stupid. So many things I've done are stupid! But I've thought like this for so long… even if sometimes I *want* to let it go… I can't. I feel like, I dunno, I'd lose a part of myself…"

"But - Ryu, didn't you want to evolve so you wouldn't be scared of Ghosts?"

"That was one reason."

"And didn't you fight off a whole swarm of Ghosts just a few days ago?"

"Don't over-exaggerate," Ryu said, shaking his head. "Fears don't disappear that easily. I still have nightmares about them. Had them since the first ones we saw. I'm not even sure evolving would change that."

Fen was struggling for a response.

"But here I am, getting angry about this again," Ryu continued, his mood shifting once more. "If I just knew how to *do it*, everything would be so much simpler… I'm sorry, I shouldn't be like this…"

"Ryu," Fen said carefully, "have you ever considered that the key to evolving might involve *not* thinking so much about it?"

Ryu opened his mouth to snap a quick response, then paused. "No, but…"

"I'm not saying that that's *all* you have to do. But maybe by just focusing on things not linked to evolving, the real answer will… come naturally, somehow?"

Ryu thought. "It doesn't feel likely… but I've already done everything that I thought was."

Fen was pleasantly surprised at his willingness. "Right. And it gives you a reason to fully concentrate on everything important we've got to do."

"I see," Ryu said, nodding slowly. "I see…"

A slight smile crept across his face. "You're a smart 'mon, Fen," he said wryly. "But fine. I'll try it. Gimme a punch if I ever bring up *the topic* ."

Fen was relieved, but before he could reply there was a rumble of thunder. They both looked at the sky, only now noticing the colour-draining storm clouds that had appeared. Almost simultaneously, Fen began feeling little stinging pricks in his fur; it intensified in a matter of seconds.

He and Ryu looked at each other, but no words were needed. They sprinted through the town, past the faces of confused, anxious Pokémon, past damaged houses that Fen was certain would either flood or fall down if this storm didn't relent at once. His new tail hung behind, more exposed than any other part of him, so to compensate he pulled it between his legs with one hand, while levering himself forwards with the other. If he wasn't so focused on running, he would've been amazed by his own show of strength.

Faoz was standing to the side of her building's entrance, allowing soaking, shivering 'mon to stream inside. She looked over Fen's new form and Ryu's charred fur with disbelief as they neared.

"Hey, it's still us!" Fen shouted to her above the wind.

She nodded quickly and beckoned them over. "Did you get everything?"

"No, Scout's shop is finished," Ryu said.

Faoz opened her mouth as if to argue, but Ryu's expression convinced her that it wasn't worth it. "Come inside, then," she said.

As Fen was about to follow her through the entrance, he heard Ryu yelp. All he saw before being hit was a pair of green vines wrap around Ryu's shoulders, which propelled their owner forwards like a slingshot. It crashed into Fen, knocking him off his feet. As he wiped his eyes from the sodden grass, he saw a familiar turquoise-green creature standing over him.

"Savi," Ryu muttered opposite, picking himself up. "What in the bloody name of…"

"It *is* you!" Savi exclaimed joyously. "Sorry, I just caught a sight of you and - wow, when did you make it back? Fen, I can't believe-"

"This isn't the time, Savi!" Fen shouted at him.

Savi looked mildly terrified by his outburst, which he immediately felt bad for. "Did you… learn anything?" he asked timidly. "About the natural disasters?"

For a moment, Fen stared at him. *How the hell could he have known we were-*

Then he remembered. Savi was the only 'mon other than Faoz who'd known about their plans to find an Absol. Fen looked at Ryu and Faoz for help, but neither gave him any signal on what to do. Should he tell Savi what they were planning? Should he save time and just tell the Ivysaur to leave them alone?

In the lashing rain, he made a quick compromise.

"Savi, let's talk indoors."

The four of them, dripping with rainwater, navigated through Faoz's heaving main room - which itself was forming a surface layer - towards the door at the back. There was a sign pinned up with inked writing that Fen assumed to be the equivalent of a "KEEP OUT".

"Shake yourselves as much as you want," Faoz said as they walked inside. Things weren't much more secure here, with her open window - it was really just a hole in the wall - letting freezing air and a small puddle of water through. Zephia was in the centre of the room, and she blinked a couple of times when seeing Fen and Ryu's different appearances. She seemed far more interested in Savi after them, though, and when Savi looked at her, he froze.

"Wait, wait," Savi said, his vines creeping out from his bud. "Aren't you… that 'mon who attacked Fen in the street? Taluk was looking all over for you!"

"Huh?" Zephia said tiredly. "Oh, I was trying to remember… Yeah, I disguised myself as you to isolate Fen."

Savi's vines burst out outwards. "What - who even-!"

"Savi, she's not an enemy!" Fen said hastily, grabbing one of the vines. "This is Zephia. She can make herself look like other Pokémon. Don't ask how. The point is, we've resolved our differences and are working together now."

Savi looked between the two of them like he needed further convincing. Zephia's face showed only dislike. Fen noted how she'd never done an illusion for demonstration, even in a case like this when it would've been helpful. *Then again, that might qualify as something fun, which I'm pretty sure she's immune to…*

"Look Savi, we don't have all day," Faoz barked. "You can return your vines or get out of here."

Wordlessly, looking slightly ashamed, Savi took the first option.

"So, you two got nothing from Scout?" Faoz asked Fen and Ryu.

"Yep," Ryu confirmed miserably. "The whole place went bust. Seed explosion is what Fen guessed…"

"We did get food and water, though," Fen hastened to add.

Faoz made a snort of amusement. "Seed explosion… It's not what I hoped for, but I was prepared for the worst, so…"

She hesitated, her eyes drawn to Savi. "Fen, if he's not coming with us, he can't see what I'm about to do. Decide whether he is or not."

'Why me?!' Fen wanted to protest. He did grudgingly understand: he was the one with the 'Psychic abilities', as Faoz called it, and he knew more about the human world than anyone else. He was surely, despite hating the title, their 'team leader' for this journey.

"Is Shaice able to carry five of us?" he asked.

"Weight counts far more than just numbers," Faoz said. "But he should manage. Weather will be a greater threat."

"Did you and Zephia work out where we need to go?"

"We think we know where I landed," Zephia spoke up. "Once we're there, I can work out what direction I flew in from."

"Okay." Fen turned to Savi. "I'm about to tell you everything we know. If, after hearing this, you still agree to go along with us, there'll be no turning back. Do you understand?"

"Yes!" Savi said at once.

As quickly as he could, Fen told Savi about himself, what they'd learned and what their plans were now. Savi's face was fixed in a state of shock for almost the whole explanation. Fen looked at him expectantly when he'd finished, but it took him a few seconds to open his mouth.

"I… I don't know what to say… I mean, I had no idea-"

"I know, Savi," Fen said wearily. "Are you still with us, though?"

"I… yes! Of course I am!" Savi said, regaining his composure. "I'd do anything to stop these disasters! That's why I was looking for you in the first place."

Fen was surprised by Savi's change of attitude; even if the disasters were more clearly a problem now, he'd been quick to withdraw himself before.

Faoz spoke. "The Electrics are still unwell, aren't they?"

"Yeah," Savi said, quieter. "That's… also why I want to help." He turned to Fen and Ryu's puzzled faces. "You guys remember Lucxa?"

"The Luxio?" Fen said.

Savi nodded. "He's not doing good. It's the earthquakes… actually no, more the general earth *tremors.* Electrics can feel them more intensely than any other 'mon. Lucxa took a few days to get over the first earthquake, but he never seemed quite… stable. I thought he would eventually get better… but when the second earthquake hit, wrecking half the town with it, he was hurt so badly… and even now he's a shell of himself, acting terrified. He keeps telling me that more quakes are imminent. Hearing what you're saying, Fen, it all makes sense."

"It's been the same with all pure Electrics," Faoz said to them. "Even 'mon like Taluk, the Electabuzz chief, can hardly function right now. That's partially why the security here has turned to such shit."

Just then, a particularly strong gust of wind blew in and the room seemed to jerk left. Faoz glanced at the window, then the growing puddle underneath.

"I think that, with this storm, it'll be safer to sleep outside. We *have* shelter," she added, when Fen was about to protest. "Yes, that would definitely be safer. We'll head over once we're done here."

She seemed so certain about her view that Fen couldn't bring himself to debate it.

"If we're all definitely on board," Faoz continued, "then I can show you *this.* " She pointed to the chest. Deflating her yellow sac again and retrieving the key, she stuck it into the locked box and threw the lid open.

"Oh, these are useless," she muttered, chucking aside a scatter of papers that looked to have map sketches on. For a moment, she peered at the chest's remainders like it was the first time she'd seen inside. Then her paws got to work, pulling out any object she could find.

"One day, Shaice and I set off to explore everything on this island - that's what created the map you have," she explained quickly. "On that journey, we found a few valuable things, which after some passing around ended up in this chest - there was no need to sell, and I had no other use for them. At least they've got a use now."

As the chest was emptied, Fen's eyes were drawn to a dense, frozen block. It was covered with icicles, and he could just make out bright colours at its centre. While he wondered what on earth the block could be, Faoz pointed to it.

"Fen, melt this for me."

Fen did as she asked. Concentrating a small amount of fire on the block, he soon had to skitter away from the freezing water that slid off.

Faoz waved for him to stop, then broke apart what was left of the ice. A clump of yellow objects were stuck together. She glanced at the rest of the scattered items. "I *thought* I had more than this, but it'll do. You two," she said to Fen and Ryu, "give me a bag that isn't full."

"H-hold on Faoz!" Ryu exclaimed. "What is all this? Why were those berries frozen?"

"They're sitrus berries," she said. "I froze them because they're too valuable to rot. Got twice the healing capacities of orans and can heal conditions better than lums. Better be worth it, though; ice is a bitch to exhale. You wouldn't understand." She smirked at them, then looked around the floor and piled a multicolour of seeds together. "We've got a sleep, stun, quick and blast here. I assume you know what all of those do."

Then she gathered up three scarves and pointed to each in turn. "This one helps you evade attacks, but makes you more vulnerable to any that hit; this one boosts the power of elemental techniques, such as my water, but slows you down in the process; this one gives increases physical prowess, but reduces your…" She paused. "…

thinking speed, I believe… anyway, obviously don't use a scarf for longer than you need, and if you do use one, you *must* know what you're doing. They're dangerous items. Bag?"

Fen took Ryu's bag off his shoulders and passed it over. Faoz peered inside. "We should get rid of anything you don't need," she said, taking out their map, then the empty pouches that had contained berries and seeds. "These might be useful for sorting items," she muttered, placing them to one side. She pulled out the waterproof skin. "What was this for?"

"It keeps me dry in the rain, and is warm," Fen said. Then a wave of panic hit him. "Well, it *did* do that… I suppose it wouldn't fit me now…"

"Yeah. I see." Faoz looked at it again. "I'm not sure it's worth keeping in that case."

"B-but, I mean, if it rains, and we don't have cover-"

"What are you asking me for? Look, no Fire has ever died because of a *little rain* . And you'll certainly be more resistant to it now you've evolved."

It hurt pretty badly when I was outside, Fen thought miserably. But this was an argument he was destined to lose. "Fine. Let's get rid of it."

Faoz pulled out a fist-sized pebble. "What about this?"

"That's mine," Ryu said quickly. "I need it. Please."

Faoz looked at it again, but before she could answer something creaked - thankfully, it was only the door. A small Buizel crept inside the room. She had looked worried, but her eyes lit up with anger when she saw Faoz.

"Buin!" Faoz exclaimed. "I… I was going to tell you-"

"But you didn't, did you mum?" Buin shouted back. "Just like you didn't tell me you'd disappear for *four days* !"

Faoz suddenly seemed panicked, glancing around the room. "I didn't think I'd be gone for-" she began.

"But why couldn't you tell me? Oh, I know why - you don't tell me *anything* !" There was both anger and tears in Buin's eyes. "Do you… do you even realise that I'm here? It's bad enough only seeing Shai like, *never*… may as well not have any parents…"

"Buin, you know why Shai can't live with us-"

"Well, why can't we live in the highlands then?"

"Because, like I told you, we*…* " Faoz suddenly turned to their awkwardly stood group again. "All of you, go," she said, voice strained. "I'll catch up. Now! Get out!"

Fen hardly needed an excuse. Zephia led them towards the window.

"We know the way," Ryu said to Fen and Savi, as they did their best to ignore what was behind them. "Shaice is really close. You shouldn't get too wet." Then he jumped out after Zephia.

"Who's Shaice?" Savi muttered.

"A Salamence."

"Huh." Savi sounded slightly dazed. "Of course it is…"

At the window, a gust of wind hit Fen so strongly that he was pushed back indoors, as if telling him how bad an idea this was. But at the second attempt, he forced his body off the ledge.

He cried out at the explosion of pain that hit him, landing in waist high, soaking grass. With the sky already dark, the rain was blinding. Luckily ahead of him, Ryu briefly made his paw glow so he and Savi could follow.

He couldn't tell what kind of environment this was, nor did he care much. They struggled across uneven terrain for a couple of minutes before reaching a hillock. He could see the dim silhouette of Shaice inside its C-shaped indent; though he was lying down, the Dragon had to angle his tail backwards to keep it protected.

Once he'd dried himself under the shelter, Fen's next priority was to talk to Shaice, now he finally had the chance. He had so much to thank him for; saving them from the Weavile, flying them all the way back from Glyciak, and now agreeing to take on a much more significant flight. Savi was standing a distance from the Dragon, just staring in awe, while Ryu was explaining something to him.

As he walked towards Shaice, Zephia called out, "I wouldn't do that."

The source of this advice was more surprising than the words themselves. Fen stopped and turned to her. "Why?"

"He's… not very sociable… and it'd be even worse with you. He's also asleep."

Shaice's head was lying so only one eye was visible from Fen's position, though moving his tail closer confirmed that it was closed. "Fair enough. But what do you mean, not sociable?"

"Faoz told us that Dragons are usually kept reserved to their own kind," Zephia said. "They don't move out of their habitat, and so don't converse with other types."

Fen nodded. *Reasonable, I suppose, given their size.* "They're like Darks, then?"

Zephia frowned. "Similar, maybe. But for example: on the way back from Glyciak, Ryu wanted to ask Shaice a lot of questions. He wouldn't answer directly; Faoz had to ask him and relay his answers, and even then there were things that Shaice just refused to address."

"Okay… so why would he be worse with me?"

Zephia sighed. "Think about how Faoz reacted when you told her you used to be a human. Remember her story about Kyunn? She said she got it from some other Dragons."

"Ah… Shaice sees me in a similar way?"

"A worse way. Whereas Faoz trusts you, despite who you are, I don't think he does. His views were pretty strong. He didn't want to fly you because of who you were. Plus, he didn't approve of how we plan to find the route across, given how unknown the journey will be… and because of where we're planning to go. It's amazing that Faoz could convince him of *anything* ."

"Huh…" Fen was lost in thought for a second. "Hold on though. How come Faoz can speak to him, and convince him of so much? She's not a Dragon either."

Zephia looked at him with a mixture of scorn and astonishment. "Think," she said. "What was Faoz talking about *just now* ?"

"Well, Buin wanted to see her father more, but he lived in the highlands or something, and…"

It suddenly dawned on him. "What? But… how is that even possible?"

Zephia shrugged. "It's unusual, I agree. Maybe you should ask them if you're so interested."

Fen scowled back at her for that. He knew as well as she how bad an idea that was, assuming what she'd said about Shaice was true. What he could conclude from the last day was just how fortunate they were to have gained Faoz's support.

Zephia had moved away from him slightly now, her attention on the darkness outside their hillock.

"Zephia?" he asked.

She turned her head wearily.

"How are you… how are you feeling about this? Going back to Hoenn?"

Zephia, in a rare occasion, considered the question for a while.

"I'm glad I have the chance," she said. "But I don't know if I'm still being searched for, so I'll have to be careful. I'll keep illusions up wherever possible."

Fen nodded. "I understand. As long as we know what you look like."

"Also… just *going* there doesn't mean much yet, since neither of us know where my parents are. *But,* " she added, "I haven't forgotten your part of the deal. And that comes first for now."

"I'd hope so, since that part's a pretty big thing."

"Mm." Zephia turned back to the darkness, where Fen could see a Faoz-like silhouette in the distance.

Zephia's clear reluctance to keep talking almost made Fen hold back his words, but he couldn't turn down the chance.

"Zephia, what you did in Glyciak, with the Weavile, while I was in that state…"

"I did what was needed," she interrupted. "That's all it was."

It was exactly the dismissal Fen expected, but he was still disappointed. He sighed. "I appreciated it, that's all."

Faoz trudged in shortly afterwards, head held low, with both bags on her shoulders. Up until now, Fen had never seen her look remotely miserable. Even in those desperate times at Glyciak, she'd been as hopeful and energetic as one could imagine.

"Faoz? You alright?" Savi said.

"Do me a favour and don't ask, please," she muttered, heading straight over to Shaice. She nudged his head, and his visible eye narrowly opened. They exchanged whispers for a short time - Fen was surprised that Shaice could make his voice so quiet. Then Faoz moved away, and the Dragon's body shifted so his wing closest to the bank could be lifted into the air.

"Climb in here and lie down," she said to the rest of them. "It's the warmest place there is."

None of them saw reason to argue, so they squeezed into the small space vacated by the wing. The wing lowered so that its curved, far edge leant against the bank, but the rest of it was raised enough to not fall onto the four of them. Fen saw what Faoz meant; the bank on one side, Shaice's body on the other, and his wing all around shielded them almost entirely from the howling wind. Plus, the Salamence exuded an incredible heat for something that wasn't a Fire.

"Sleep well, and we'll set off in the morning," Faoz murmured from outside the wing. "Any questions… ask them tomorrow. That's all."

There were a few footsteps, then silence.

Fen had trouble sleeping. Though they were cramped under the wing, it wasn't due to discomfort; having a tail allowed him to curl his whole body around its flame, keeping him warm. The problem, unusually, was that didn't feel tired enough. He'd been exhausted before eating the violent seed, but the combination of that and evolving seemed to have completely cured him. It felt like a double-edged sword.

Then, when he finally got to sleep, it felt like only seconds before Shaice lifted his wing and Faoz shouted him awake. It was the crack of dawn; her guild schedule hadn't been spared on them. The storm

had passed, and the morning sky was clear, searingly hot, though none of them could complain.

Their plan - fly to a place called Corsa Bay, whereupon Zephia could work out the rough direction to go towards Hoenn - was reviewed with everyone. Once it was confirmed, Faoz set about organising how they would all fit on Shaice. The Dragon first got onto a higher area of land, then made himself flat against the floor so they could climb up. With numerous pieces of rope, Faoz then tied Fen, Ryu and Savi close together on the Dragon's wide, scaly back, so their legs and core were completely immobile.

Zephia was the last to be tied, around the middle of Shaice's neck; this was so she could easily give orders to Faoz about directions. Faoz sat just above Zephia, but with no one left to secure her, she merely used the three fins on either side of Shaice's head. Her arms held onto the top two like handlebars, while her stubby legs slid under the middle fins and rested securely on the lower ones. She kept hold of her bag, while Ryu's was tied on with him.

When everyone was ready, Shaice stepped off the edge of the hill. One beat of his immense wings took them several feet into the air, and several feet further forwards.

For a while, all Fen's worries were cast aside as he absorbed the experience of the flight. They were sailing among the clouds in a matter of minutes, and he simply watched Shaice's flat, almost-stationary wings, in awe at how effortlessly they worked. Ryu took great pleasure in his reaction, as Fen wondered just how many people - humans or Pokémon - had been able to ride a Salamence at all. It couldn't be many.

Unfortunately, the 'mon alongside them wasn't enjoying things so much. The signs were there in Savi's initial hesitance to climb onto Shaice, but it became obvious once they took off; he buried his head into Shaice's body, eyes closed.

"Sorry," he said when they asked how he was. Every word had to be spoken loudly above the wind. "I'm not gonna say that flying would've influenced my decision to come… but I didn't realise it was the only option until we got here…"

In days gone by Fen may have left him be, but he already felt nervous enough taking Savi with them; he didn't want things to start this badly. "Is there anything that would help you, say, take your mind off things? Is talking right now helping?"

"Maybe… a little," Savi said. "Yeah… hey, you never explained much of what happened in those days you were away. Did you really walk all the way to Glyciak?"

And so, Fen and Ryu spent the next few hours explaining, often in minute detail, their recent experiences. It was a relief that Savi shared much the same opinions on his humanity as Ryu had told him. In fact, Fen's moments of confusion with his body that he'd often found himself having were what Savi enjoyed hearing about the most. He also seemed quite shocked at the amount of danger they'd both come through, but Fen wasn't surprised; he felt the same when he considered it.

It took a couple of hours for them to land at Corsa Bay, where Zephia reoriented them. After that, they were flying only across the ocean. The blue, sun-tinted water stretched so emphatically in all directions that it soon felt like they weren't moving at all. This continued past sunset, and with nowhere close to stop, Faoz gave Shaice a couple of sitrus berries to sustain his energy. Fen sensed discontent beginning to spread. There was no way that Zephia would intentionally misguide them, but if her directions *were* wrong, they'd be hopelessly lost at sea.

He was starting to believe it too, when a glimmer of light appeared ahead, and all six of them exclaimed at once. Shaice's wings swung with a renewed vigour as they got a better look. Even in the darkness, Fen could tell that the landmass ahead was huge, spiked with areas of light. They were surely looking at Hoenn.

"Hey!" Zephia turned around to him, shouting over the wind. "Any idea where we land? The places with light will have humans in, right?"

"Uh… yeah!" Fen replied, jogging his memory. Towns or cities would always have some light around, whether that was from cars, streetlights or 24-hour shops. A combination of their low altitude and lack of daylight meant he couldn't see beyond the part of Hoenn closest to the sea. But… where *was* the light? There were specks in the great distance, but, nothing close… were they just flying over a very rural area?

"Fly a little further," he said. "I can't see any towns near the coast here."

Their lack of light was the first thing to go wrong. The second came a few minutes later, just as they were passing over the edge of Hoenn.

It started when they heard two simultaneous cries that, despite being a distance from them, were so raw and earthly that Fen held his breath at the sound. Then Savi was yelling something and pointing with both vines; looking down, Fen saw two vast figures, red and blue. Despite the blinding light they radiated, their features appeared perfectly clear in his vision. He saw every enormous red plate covering Groudon's body, every blue scale on Kyogre exterior. Parts of their bodies glowed with a yellow energy that he could feel all the way from Shaice's height.

They were both in the sea, but Groudon appeared to be on a chunk of blackened land just big enough for it to stand. Kyogre disappeared for a second, then it made another cry, and a tsunami of water rose up from the previously calm waves, smothering the red light it aimed for.

A bolt of lightning struck mere metres in front of them, making Shaice lose control of his wing. Before he could rebalance, the wind picked up so strongly that the wings were pushed behind him, and they swerved sharply downwards.

As the Dragon hurtled around in the storm, Fen risked another glance below. But the two figures in the sea had disappeared, and the water blinded him before he could look further. The force of water hitting him froze his muscles, preventing him from even crying out.

He hadn't realised they were falling until there was a *crack,* and Shaice recoiled so sharply that Fen was scared his bound limbs would dislocate . He saw Shaice's near wing fold in response to a tree, and without it they plummeted almost vertically before crashing into the ground, via another couple of trees hitting the Dragon's flanks.

Shaice's body went still. Fen could only hope that he was okay. Even if his limbs had been free, he wouldn't have been able to move. He tried breathing for a few moments.

Faoz appeared quickly, allaying his fear that she had fallen off and left them stuck on Shaice's back for eternity. Once she untied his ropes he immediately tried moving his legs, but they barely responded.

"Take my paw," Faoz said firmly, holding it in front of him. Before Fen did, he jerked his head meaningfully towards Shaice.

"Don't worry about him," Faoz said. "He'll be fine."

Using Faoz's paws, Fen slid with her off Shaice's back. The Dragon's left wing had been sandwiched between three trees, and was twisted on its side, the tip pointing upwards. Though it only offered scant cover, Zephia was already underneath it, and she looked just as shaken as Fen felt.

"I'll get the others. Wait here," Faoz ordered. She looked remarkably well compared with how he felt.

Fen pressed himself against the wing, avoiding as much rain as he could. He tried using his tail flame to see in a semi-circular radius, but it was too small. Then, a strange thought occurred to him. He

had control of the muscles in his tail - why couldn't he control its flame, too? If he just focused on making the flame larger…

Despite his hesitancy to strain himself any further, it worked immediately. The flame rose as long as the tail itself, as wide as his head. He poked his head out and saw that the ground just past Shaice's tail fell off completely. They must be at the edge of the cliff they'd approached.

All around them were trees, so tightly packed that it seemed a wonder that Shaice had managed to land at all. The ground was sodden but not flooded, to his relief.

At the very least, he thought, *we've landed. We've made it to Hoenn in one piece.* Given how they'd arrived, that felt almost worth celebrating.

Ryu, Savi and Faoz had crowded with him and Zephia by this time, and he relayed his limited information to them.

"Is Shaice okay?" Ryu asked. "I-I know he's breathing, but…"

"Yes he's okay, but he's injured and very tired," Faoz said. "He can't unfold his other wing, and this one is stuck until it's cleared from the trees. Before that, though - does anyone have an idea where we are?"

"I don't think we're near any kind of town…" Fen said uncertainly. "Do you know, Zephia?"

"I've been in a lot of forests like this," she said. "And I hardly know Hoenn's geography anyway. I'm no better than you."

Fen nodded. "We won't find much out here, so I think we should wait for the storm to die down, then move off."

"Are you sure we should wait?" Faoz questioned. "This storm looks like it'll last a while."

"Well, could we at least find a cover for now?" Fen said, as calmly as he could. He was struggling to keep his shaking body still. "You may be right, Faoz, but I can hardly see a thing, and even if you can, we have *no idea* what's out here. I don't want to take that chance."

"It's pretty important that you don't die," Zephia added, "so I'm willing to agree with that."

"Me too," Ryu said.

"Alright, fine," Faoz said. "We can wait." She glanced around Shaice's bent wing. "We don't need to find a cover; breaking off the tree trunks that Shai's wings are stuck against would do the trick. You two Fighters will be best at that," she said, nodding to Fen and Ryu.

"It'd be difficult for either of us to break trees with our bare paws," Ryu argued. "Maybe Savi could help us? His vines are pretty strong. If they wrapped around one side, while we punched the other…?"

They turned to Savi for confirmation, but found him lying low on his front, the flattened leaves on his back covering as much of his quivering body as possible. His face remained visible, and his eyes opened wide and fearful at the question.

"I… I can't go out there," he gasped. "What's just happened… those legendaries… I wasn't ready…"

The Meteorologist

No one spoke for a second. Then without warning, Zephia leapt forwards and yanked Savi's head up to her own.

"Listen to me, you useless plant," she hissed. "You have two choices here. One, you pull your fucking leaves together, do what you're asked, and help us build shelter. The other is that you keep crying, help no one, and increase our chances of dying. Which sounds better to you?"

"Zephia, get off him!" Fen cried, panicked.

Zephia scowled, but released her paw. Savi skittered back immediately, shaking even more than before. "You try him, then," Zephia said.

That was all Fen could do. "Savi… I know this is dangerous, and we can't turn back now. But I know you're strong, because you fought off that forest of Ghosts nearly single-handedly, right? You can handle this, without a doubt."

Savi seemed unable to respond, and Zephia grabbed him by the leg this time.

"Quit behaving like a scared hatchling!" she said. "Haven't you evolved before? You must have done *something* to make that possible! Now's the time to show it, you coward!"

"A-ALRIGHT!" Savi finally shouted back at her. "I'll help! Just… please let go of me!"

Zephia did so, and Savi raised his head to them.

"I'm s-sorry… I just hate being in the air, and when we fell… I-I thought we'd all die… I was so scared…"

"Savi, we're all scared here," Ryu said. "… Most of us, anyway. But when you are, I've found the best way to get over it is to do stuff that'll make you safer. Yeah? So… d'you think you can help us clear the trees? It'll be really easy."

Savi very slowly got onto four legs. "Of course I'll help," he murmured. "Shouldn't be here otherwise…"

As they left the wing shelter, Fen met Zephia's eye and gave her a small nod of thanks. She returned nothing.

Clearing the trees was indeed straightforward thanks to the thinness of their trunks. Savi wrapped his vines around one side of the trunk and pulled, while Ryu and Fen threw kicks and punches at the other end. Once the three trees around Shaice were cleared, Faoz managed to coax the injured 'mon into stretching his wing over their stumps.

"Before we sleep," Savi said tentatively as they settled down, "should someone keep a watch? I know it's not convenient, but as we don't know what's out here, I think at least one of us should be alert…"

"I suppose we could," Ryu said. "But I mean, would anyone want to-?"

"I'll do it," Zephia said at once. Ryu looked at her, astonished.

"What?" she snapped. "I hardly sleep anyway. And I don't think we're too far from dawn. It's nothing."

"Uh… okay then," Ryu said. "Thanks."

"You'll need at least a *little* sleep, Zephia," Faoz said. "I can take over when it's halfway to dawn."

Zephia shrugged. "Fine. I'll wake you when needed."

The others thanked them both, which of course Zephia didn't acknowledge. But as Fen lay under the wing, he reflected that, as

unstable as her behaviour could be, he probably valued her presence more than anyone here, other than Ryu.

I say unstable, but… the Savi episode aside, she's been getting more cooperative recently. She didn't have to warn me about speaking to Shaice, for example, but she still did. And now volunteering to take watch. Is she maybe… getting nicer?

Those were his last thoughts before drifting out of consciousness. But it seemed mere moments later that images flashed through his mind.

He'd had dreams before as a Pokémon, but they were just that - random sequences from his unconscious that were usually forgotten, and even those he remembered were too bizarre to mean anything. This one was different, though. It threw images at him like a rabid Vigoroth, and he was powerless to resist.

It started as something foggy, but the picture soon cleared, and when it had he knew exactly what he was seeing. He was in the same place as his previous vision. Groudon and Kyogre fighting, decimating the areas beneath them, people screaming, running away…

The terror that gripped him made his dream-self want to flee, escape back to the real world where this wasn't happening. But he couldn't leave…

Someone grabbed his shoulder. They were shouting at him, but he couldn't make out the words, and he didn't have time to listen. He was running, and there was something important here, he couldn't leave, he needed to-

Pain hit him so strongly that the images shattered, like panes of broken glass. He screamed, in which world he wasn't sure, then… then he was in darkness again. He grabbed the closer tree stump and wrapped around it to stop his body from shaking. He forced

himself to listen to the rain pounding against Shaice's wing. *We're safe here*, he told himself.

He hadn't had an emotion attack since he and Ryu were at Ractyl's Belt. He'd assumed that, for some reason, they had stopped entirely. But now those feelings of fear, anxiety and urgency were stronger than ever, and it was what he'd *seen* that stood this one apart, and what worried him so much. Why was it this exact same vision again? Why did it hurt so much to think about?

"You had a nightmare?" a tired voice said. It was Zephia, with one eye turned to him while she gazed into the darkness.

"Sort of," Fen murmured. "It was like a vision. The same thing I saw in Darkrai's Knot… I don't understand it."

"Hmm." He saw the corner of her mouth twitch into a frown. "Shame you can't figure out what it all means."

"It is," he said, while bathing in as much of his tail's heat as possible. Then he realised that lighting up their location wasn't the best idea, so turned it down again.

Hopefully we'll find out before it's too late.

Faoz woke them early next morning. The rain had apparently stopped just as the sun rose, being replaced with a humid heat. It did allow them to check their surroundings properly, but the brightened trees showed a depressing sight. If their wilted branches weren't bad enough, the sheer lack of anything growing suggested that the woodland wouldn't be harvesting anytime soon.

They started heading away from the coastline. Unwilling and unable to fly, Shaice stomped alongside them, slowing their pace. Fen hadn't had high hopes for finding anything, so it was a great surprise when they stumbled across a clearing, overlooking something which - well, it looked to have once *resembled* a town. Now, there seemed

to be so many things wrong with the sight that Fen struggled to take it all in.

The side of town closest to them at least showed signs of life. There were houses, parked cars, roads and shrubbery, though it all looked uncomfortably reminiscent of Sanguin Town. On his right, the town narrowed into a single path that dipped out of sight towards a river and bridge.

But to the left of the town… he couldn't understand what he was seeing. Where the town should've continued, there was nothing - only a grey layer of a sludge-like substance. Even stranger, a grey haze quickly blocked his vision beyond the sludge.

After asking Faoz's permission, he climbed on Shaice's back to get a better view, but the haze was just as persistent higher up. Stepping off, he addressed the four Pokémon's hopeful looks as best he could.

"I'm not sure what town this is," he said, "but I'm sure that it shouldn't look like this left side."

They climbed on Shaice in turn, but no one had an inkling of what had happened. "What do you suggest?" Faoz asked Fen.

"Well, the most likely way of finding information is to go into the town and look around."

"I thought you said we need to be careful around these places," Faoz said.

"We *should* be careful. But I can't see a single human or Pokémon out here right now."

"This isn't right," Zephia agreed. "We should go in." The air between her and Fen shimmered slightly, then he was suddenly looking at a brown-and-cream furred Pokémon with long, pointy ears. "Like I told

you, I'm not taking any chances," Zephia added at his look. Her eyes remained turquoise, and the Eevee's face retained her typical scowl.

Fen took a step forward then paused. "Uh… Faoz, I don't think Shaice should come with us, given his size." He wished he felt confident speaking to the Dragon directly.

Faoz nodded, then exchanged a few words with Shaice. "That's fine, he could do with a rest. Can he stay here?"

Fen saw no harm in it. Once Faoz confirmed with Shaice, the remaining five of them started towards the town.

It got mistier the further they descended, and Fen picked up a very distinct scent: ash, just like the air around Arkan. It did not fill him with the excitement it had done then. They stepped through flattened brown grass before reaching a very large building, standing on its own at the edge of the town.

Its white exterior and circular, red roof - which Fen had to stand back to see properly, given its height - might have looked impressive some time ago, but now it was cracked, and the colours faded. He could see the outlines of windows dotted around, but each one was completely covered with what looked like cardboard and duct tape.

They walked around the outside, and something caught Ryu's attention as they neared the front. "What's this?" he said, pointing at an inscription to the left of a set of glass doors.

Fen read the bold words out. "Fallarbor Pokémon Centre." He repeated them to himself. *Fallarbor…* "This must be Fallarbor Town, then," he said. The name was familiar, but it triggered nothing else in his mind… at least it was a checkmark on his blank map of Hoenn. Could he have lived here? Surely he would have remembered more… but how could he know?

"Uh… Fen?" Ryu said, interrupting his train of thought. "What did you… you just read that thing?"

"What do you mean?" Fen frowned. "Of course I read it. It's…"

Then he realised. "Oh. This is in English - human language."

"What the hell… that's a language? It looks like… dunno, load of gibberish to me…"

"You can understand this language, Fen?" Faoz said.

"Looks like it. Seeing as I don't understand your written language, it makes sense that I still know the human one." Fen's eyes brightened. "Try and remember what these letters look like. If you come across signs, or maps, or anything like that in this language, tell me, because it could be… very…"

His mind was still pondering the words 'Pokémon Centre', and he suddenly remembered.

"That's it! These places - Pokémon Centres - are like hospitals for Pokémon. If a trainer's Pokémon got injured fighting, they would come here. There should be, like, places you can eat, get rest, there'll be news of what's going on, and…"

"Trainer?" Ryu said tentatively. "What's that? What's it got to do with us?"

Fen cursed himself. "It's to do with the relationship some humans have with… some Pokémon. They… look, it's not important now. We can't be wasting time here; let's look inside."

Ryu looked a little disgruntled, but he didn't complain. Fen made a move towards the door, underneath a small roof, when Zephia called out. "Stop. I can smell humans… they're in this building."

Fen hesitated. He wasn't sure whether to be reassured or panicked that there were some of them around.

"I still think we should go in," he said. "Look, there's five of us here. We can defend ourselves, and even make a run for it if necessary. Is

that okay with you?"

Zephia pawed at the ground for a few seconds. "You'd better know what you're doing," she said eventually.

You know fully well that I don't, Fen thought ruefully back. No one else argued though, so he stepped up to the door. It was automatic but didn't open, so he yanked the two sides of glass apart. Either his new form was very strong, or the door was very weak.

With all the windows blocked, the room they walked into was almost pitch-black. Fen looked for a light switch, but unable to find one increased his tail flame instead. It was a large area, but there was little of note; a block of chairs for people to wait in, signs that were aimed at trainers and of no use to Fen, a reception desk with no one sitting behind. If humans were in this building, he'd seemingly have to go looking for them.

To their right was a dull stone staircase, which signs pointed upwards to 'Pokémon Care - Main'. Fen led them up very carefully, but at the top there were still no signs of life. A fuse box next to the door was left open, and he pressed what he thought was a light switch but got nothing.

He walked along the dirty white floor past hospital rooms. Some doors were shut, others hanging ajar, but the few he looked inside were as dark and desolate as the rest of the building. There was another waiting room at the far end with cosier-looking chairs. It had a switched-off television, a few magazines, plus paper and colouring pencils. Fen checked that the TV was plugged in at the mains, then pressed its power button. Again, no response.

It looks like there's no electricity here. But why would people have blocked all the windows if it meant they'd be living in darkness?

He briefly turned back to the others. Ryu, Savi and Faoz were all gazing with similar levels of awe at the TV, the thick concrete walls and floor, the human language that was everywhere. Zephia showed

no interest for any of this; the way her eyes were fixed on Fen himself made him suspect she was consciously avoiding looking around.

"Are you sure there are humans here, Zephia?" he asked quietly.

"Definitely."

"In that case…" He checked the sign at a new set of stairs, next to the waiting room. It read 'Food Court and Special Pokémon Care. Roof - Special Access Only'.

"Looks like they're on the top floor."

At the top of the final flight of stairs, two huge closed doors stood next to each other, labelling the two locations on the previous sign - Food Court on the left, and Special Pokémon Care on the right. As Fen hesitated, Zephia nodded to the left door. "The scent's stronger this way," she said.

Fen nodded. He checked the door handle - locked. This didn't surprise him in context with the rest of the building, but he couldn't understand why these people would lock themselves away.

He knocked and got no response. "Hello?" he called out. Still nothing. "We think we can help you, but we need to ask some questions first. Could you let us in, please?"

His ears picked up something on the other side, but the door muffled whatever was being said. It didn't sound friendly, though. Still no one unlocked the door.

"Can't you get in?" Ryu said.

"It needs opening on the other side."

Ryu glanced sceptically between him and door, then went up to it and alternated between pushing it and fiddling with the handle. Fen picked up more unfriendly noise.

"I think I can do it," Ryu said. His paw holding the handle began glowing. "Can't be *that* tough…"

"Wait, don't-!" Zephia began.

But as she cried out, Ryu slammed the handle downwards and kicked the door with both feet. The moment the door flew open, leaving one side unhinged, and Ryu landed in the open doorway, a circular, palm-sized object came flying out of the darkness. It was too sudden for him to avoid.

But rather than the sphere bouncing off Ryu's body, it latched onto him like glue. Then in an instant, his body turned white and shrunk, losing all its shape, until it had been completely absorbed by the sphere's open side, which clicked shut as he vanished.

Fen's vision flickered; he nearly collapsed in shock. *No, no, no… he can't be… they didn't-!*

Then the ball opened again, white light burst out and it broke it two, the pieces smashing into opposite walls. Ryu was restored, but on his knees now. He was panting, shaking feverishly, unable to speak. He turned to Fen with a look of complete terror.

"GRRAAAA!"

Zephia suddenly ran past Ryu, towards the crowd of human faces - Fen had only just seen them in the room's candlelight.

"Zephia, no!" he screamed, lunging at her, but he'd seen her too late, and she was too quick. That was until a pair of vines tripped her back legs; then Fen could only fall helplessly on top of her.

"You… you… arghhhh! Let me go, *let me go* !" She writhed around Fen's grip, but he had a strength advantage now, and held her firmly. Her illusion had been discarded.

"We can't attack these people! Use your head, Zephia! They're the ones we need to talk to! I need them for *you,* too!"

But she didn't listen, continuing to wriggle and scream at him. Though Fen didn't want to try knocking her out, the option was fast becoming necessary before someone padded behind him.

"Fen," Faoz said simply, holding out a blue seed. Fen had never valued her more than in that moment. He nodded to her, and she broke the sleep seed on Zephia's fur. A few seconds later, the Zorua stopped struggling and collapsed into his grip.

Fen carefully got off her back, then took the opportunity to finally survey their situation. Faoz and Savi were crouched next to him - he'd have to thank Savi later for holding Zephia back - and Ryu was still shaking on all fours. Fen restrained the instinct to hug him for the moment. He brightened his tail and addressed the figures opposite them. He could see a number of faces, all human, but the one crouched furthest forward attracted his attention.

He looked dumbly at the man for some time; something about human faces seemed strangely off to him now. The man's appearance seemed quite fitting with their surroundings. His light-brown hair was a tangled mess that fell to his shoulders, and his scraggly beard gave the same impression. There were scratches all over his face and arms, and the clothes he wore were ripped. His sharp green eyes, however, weren't fearful like Fen would've expected, but determined. Angry, even.

Fen then realised that shining a flame so close to his face may have contributed to that.

As he shrunk it, the man opened his mouth and barked something at him. And it was only *something* - Fen wondered if he'd misheard in his state of anxiety, or if these living conditions had simply reduced the man to nonsense talk. Strangely though, he could still gather the general meaning of the man's message. " *If you try hurting us, we'll fight back."*

But Fen shook his head. *I've said that we won't attack! Don't they understand me?*

"Look," he began, more assertively, "none of us are going to-"

A couple of people screamed. The man shouted another incomprehensible message, then snatched up a new poké ball in his hand, holding it back in a throwing stance. A woman a few faces back stood up, holding a kitchen knife. Fen was panicking now, and that adrenaline helped him remember a crucial detail.

Humans and Pokémon speak two different languages! That's why I can't understand what they're saying, and the reverse must also be true; all they hear is me growling. But how do I get around this…?

Quickly, he held his hands up in surrender and retreated a couple of paces. The man seemed taken aback, but he slowly lowered the poké ball and then waved for the women to sit down. Fen held one index finger up, then put both his hands together and looked as pleadingly at the people as possible.

Give me a moment, please.

When the people did nothing, he half-turned to Faoz and Savi, keeping one eye on their group. "If Zephia wakes up, she'll attack again," he whispered to the 'mon. "I might need to be here for a while, but I don't want us to knock her out. Any ideas?"

Neither responded immediately. Faoz eventually looked away from the humans in front of them and muttered, "I don't have any more sleep seeds. The only other option is what you don't want…"

"Wait, I can produce sleep powder," Savi said, but then his expression dimmed. "Problem is, that'd send *all* of you to sleep…"

"But only if we're in this room, right?" Faoz asked. "If you did it somewhere else, then-"

"Right!" Fen said, delighted with them. "Savi, if you take Zephia somewhere downstairs - since it looks like no humans are around there - you'll be able to stop her if she wakes up. Could you do that?"

"Uh… yeah…" Savi nodded slowly. "Yeah."

"Faoz," Fen continued. "Remember on the floor below this one, there was a stack of paper with colouring pencils?"

Faoz hesitated. "You mean… those long, thin things?"

"Pencils, yes. I need you to get as much paper as you can carry, and a couple of pencils, and take them back here, okay?"

With that agreed, Fen passed Zephia to Faoz then, with Savi, the three of them hurried out. He turned to Ryu, the only other Pokémon left, who was sitting down. The sheer fear in his face was enough to make Fen flinch in discomfort.

"Fen, what…" he said, "what just… I thought I was dying… I…"

Fen quickly put an arm around him, holding him close but keeping his attention on the people in front. "It's alright," he said. "You're safe now. You wouldn't have died, even if you hadn't broken out of the ball."

"B-but… what *was* that? It was like… I don't even know how to describe it… just terrifying…"

Fen wasn't sure how to console him. Seeing the poké ball had reminded him what they did, converting a Pokémon's body into a fundamental energy that existed in all species… but telling Ryu that probably wouldn't help. Besides, his mind was preoccupied on the plan he'd just conceived, and luckily Faoz came soon afterwards with everything he needed. He thanked her, let go of Ryu, and told them both to stay calm and trust him.

Now please, please work…

He set the stack of paper in front of him. Faoz had picked up three pencils; a yellow, red, and - *perfect!* - a black. He tried gripping the latter between his index finger and thumb, but it slipped out almost immediately, and he scrabbled to stop the pencil rolling away.

He clenched his whole fist around the pencil this time, then heard it crack as he brought it to the page. Too much. He glanced at the people; they looked both bemused and scared by what was happening. He loosened his fingers and tried once more. His handwriting was horrific, and absurdly large, but he eventually got a sentence down. He slid the paper along the floor to the shaggy-haired man. It read, *"I just want to talk. I think we can help you. (Write back.)"*

Faces crowded around the man to see what was written. Many were elderly men and women, or at least beyond their fifties. Fen couldn't see any children, or even teenagers; he hoped they were merely being kept out of sight for safety. And they'd be *very* out of sight for him; the taller humans looked twice his size.

The man finally put his poké ball in a trouser pocket. He discussed more with a small group of people for a few minutes, before finally scrawling something down on the other side of the page. Fen almost groaned when he read it.

"Who taught you to write English? Who is your trainer?"

He could already see the route this conversation would take. He had to divert things.

The next message took several minutes and a couple of scrapped papers to get right, but he eventually passed it over, needing two sheets to fit the words in.

"I taught myself. I'm not like other Pokémon. But that's not important. The five of us know what's happened to Hoenn, that Groudon and Kyogre are awake. We came here to stop them. Can you help us?"

The paper came back.

"Where did your party come from?"

"Why is that important?"

"Answer my question. Where did you come from?"

Though Fen didn't understand the obsession with this question, he couldn't see much harm in disclosing that information. He was desperate to avoid a stalemate in communication.

"It's an island across the sea, where only Pokémon live. They call it Key-un, but I don't know if it's got a human name."

The man paused for a while before responding.

"It sounds like Emritia."

Emritia! The name was familiar, but Fen could recall little; only that it was, indeed, a wholly Pokémon-populated region.

The man must have noted his reaction, because he wrote again. *"You recognise the name? How so?"*

This guy would challenge Ryu in a perceptiveness contest, Fen thought irritably. Clearly, the man wasn't going to talk unless he knew his own motives weren't bad. But how could he convince the man of that except by telling the truth about himself? He sighed. The number of times he'd verbally explained his humanity, amnesia and strange visions at least made it easier to do again in writing.

After passing a long message over, the man deliberated for some time, discussing with his group again. Most of them were shaking their head, some shouted abuse at Fen, but the man asked them patiently to calm down. Fen admired his stillness.

He then asked if Fen had any proof that he was a human. Fen, to his frustration, could think of nothing that would do this. He could talk

about any number of human concepts, but he could have merely been taught those things by a real human. So eventually he said that reading and writing the English language so fluently should be proof enough, but they would otherwise have to take his word for it. Thankfully, the man agreed with him, then his next question stumped Fen once more.

"What's your name? Can you remember?"

He *could* remember, of course, but only one name; why had he never remembered his surname? How useful that might've been now…

"I only remember my first name, which is Fen."

After asking around, the man replied. *"That is not a name any of us are familiar with. However, I can give you mine in return. I am Takao, or Dr Cozmo, Professor of Meteorology. Though such titles are hardly relevant now."*

"Because you're hiding up in a Pokémon Centre?"

"Precisely." Takao paused for a while before adding, *"Have you encountered any Pokémon since you arrived here?"*

"No."

So Takao informed him that, ever since Groudon and Kyogre had awoken, the behaviour of all Pokémon in Hoenn had changed. Those under the care of trainers or other humans had stopped obeying them. They had escaped poké balls and houses, running anywhere they could that was free of humans. Pokémon that were restrained had fought, often viciously, to free themselves. Pokémon too weak to do that just protested until it became clear that looking after them was not viable. That was why Takao wanted to know where Fen's group had come from; if it was Hoenn, their relative calmness would have made little sense.

And this Pokémon behaviour only added to the chaos happening on Hoenn. As soon as Groudon and Kyogre rose, they were clearly too strong to be stopped-

"Hold on," Fen said. *"What led to them being awoken?"*

Takao started on a new page, writing with much thought. *"It began when a group of deep-sea divers stumbled across an underwater cave, in the ocean just off Mossdeep City. Inside the cave were two gigantic rocks, side by side. The divers took pictures of the rocks, and scientists were baffled; their forms were immaculate, and a colour far darker and lustrous than anything previously seen so deep. After obtaining samples, they were found to be made up almost entirely of an undiscovered element, which had a vast atomic mass. That raised even more questions.*

"It started being speculated that these rocks were the buried remains of Groudon and Kyogre. Though that story was a mere legend, there was no better theory for their supernatural nature. An experiment was run; a diver went down with a Lanturn and asked it to attack the first rock. The Lanturn shot water out of its mouth, but upon touching the rock, the rock responded with a blast of fire, torching the Pokémon and very nearly the diver too. Another Lanturn was used to attack the second rock, but as it fired a bolt of lightning, some kind of underwater wave blasted both the diver and Pokémon out of the cavern. These astounding results only reinforced what was becoming believed."

"If you knew, or believed, that these rocks were Groudon and Kyogre," Fen asked, *"why did you think it would be a good idea to wake them up?"*

"The scientific authorities, myself included, were foolish. You may be aware that, through recent poké ball advancements and the work of very skilled trainers, there is barely a species of Pokémon in existence that we haven't been able to capture, tame, study, and use to our advantage. Groudon and Kyogre might have been legends, but we still thought they could be used to the same purposes."

"Why did you want to use them?"

"To control the weather. Due to its geography, Hoenn's climate is more erratic than anywhere else in the world; we've had seasons of persistent rain, heavy sun or wild storms almost at random. It made tourism, among other things, very difficult to promote. If we had the two weather gods under our control, we could create the perfect climate, and depending on the extent of their power, extend that to the rest of the world.

"This idea was unanimously agreed on by Hoenn's government. The next step was to find a way to wake the Pokémon. According to the vague legends we were working off, this could only be done through a power from the stars, which stumped our scientists for a long time. That was until a particularly large meteor fell in Meteor Falls - that's a few miles from here. My team was given unprecedented funding to examine the crater it left. After tunnelling deeper than perhaps any excavation in history, we made the discovery we had hoped for: a fragment with a similar structure to the original rocks.

"We were sure that this was the key. The area of sea with the rocks was dried out to allow easier access. Then a host of trainers went down with the meteor fragment and had their Pokémon attack it, pouring as much energy into it as possible, hoping this would resonate with the gods. Unfortunately, though the trainers were eventually successful, the success came without any warning. As Groudon and Kyogre woke, the power they immediately expelled ended every life within a couple of acres.

"There has only been destruction from then on. Little testing was needed to determine that Groudon and Kyogre could not be controlled like we thought. If the weather was unpredictable before, now it is completely out of control. The natural disasters have been devastating. An evacuation to this Centre happened after Mt. Chimney erupted and lava flowed down into the southern parts of town. Much of it was destroyed."

So *that* was what Fen had seen, the remnants of a volcano eruption. The ashy air made perfect sense. He swallowed; Hoenn was in even worse shape than he'd feared.

"Why can't you leave Hoenn entirely?"

"We haven't been contacted - we can't, as all communication has been down since the day Groudon and Kyogre woke - but we think that the weather is too chaotic for other regions to risk losing masses of aircraft or ships. It would essentially be a suicide mission. Hence we're stranded here until we either die, or the weather somehow calms down. We're not hopeful on either."

Fen had a lot of questions, and if this strange form of communication had any advantage, it was that it gave him time to deliberate. But he was aware of how long they'd already been talking. He didn't know how Savi was dealing with Zephia and didn't want to push his luck.

"Do you have any idea how to stop Groudon and Kyogre? Finding Rayquaza, for example?"

Takao shook his head sadly. *"I don't know if the scientists in Mossdeep or Mauville have any other ideas - I think it's unlikely - but the only one I have is what you say. But listen - we're powerless. Wild Pokémon, 'ferals' as we call them now, may be roaming through Fallarbor as we speak, looking for prey. If we go out to them, we'll die. We have no electricity, no real weapons - a few knives won't sustain us, and ferals took out what was our tiny police force already - and no Pokémon."*

That at least explained the choice of poké balls as a restraining weapon, Fen thought. *"You might be powerless,"* he replied, *"but the Pokémon I'm here with aren't. I'm not expecting you to do the work. Forget about how dangerous it is; if we're finding Rayquaza, how do you think we could do it?"*

Takao, who had been harbouring an increasingly hopeless expression, seemed to sharpen up at this. *"Meteor Falls, where we*

uncovered that rare element - there may be fragments of it left there. I don't know if that would help, but it's a strange element, and you are Pokémon, so it might react differently to you than it did for us."

Fen paused. Desperate as he was for any idea of what they should do, examining a crater for traces of an unknown element felt a pretty fragile plan.

"Do none of you have any other ideas? Any clues, just anything that would be helpful?"

Upon reading this, Takao at least raised his voice and asked the crowd of people for advice. Fen had to listen patiently to the ensuing discussion that meant nothing to him.

Eventually Takao responded. *"No one knows where Rayquaza is - that's our problem. According to legend it flies in the ozone layer of our planet, but no sighting has ever been recorded. The only other place we think might hold something of worth is the cavern with the original rocks. But that's a long, long way from here, and isn't somewhere you, as a fire-type, would be able to reach."*

And we'd need Shaice to take us there… Fen turned to Faoz. "How hurt was Shaice? Would he be able to fly anywhere right now?"

"No," Faoz said at once. "Tomorrow, I think, would be the earliest he could fly."

Fen wrote, *"How do we reach Meteor Falls from here? You said it's close-by, how long would it take on foot?"*

Takao directed him; right out of this Centre, then straight on, following the road leading to a bridge crossing a river. The road beyond wound through a grassy then mountainous route, stopping at the Falls' entrance. A couple hours' walk was his guess, though that was before considering wilds.

We'd still have time to go there today, Fen thought, *then if we find nothing we can come back here, and Shaice can try finding those rocks…* Neither option filled him with much optimism, but they seemed to have little choice. He knew that none of his group would have better ideas.

Before he left the people, he wanted to check one more detail with Takao. *"We saw Groudon and Kyogre as we were flying over here. They roared at each other, then Kyogre seemed to create a tsunami to attack with. The rain was too strong for me to see anything after that. Does that fit with what you've been able to observe?"*

"They do seem to spend most of their time under the sea. When they come to the surface, we can only pray that it's not anywhere near land."

"Do you know where they are now? Where they might strike next?"

"No idea. Hopefully not here, of course, or we're dead. Though even if we're not struck down by a natural disaster, I doubt we have much time left."

Fen knew what he meant; he could see from the people's pale faces, their haggard expressions, that they were starving and unwell.

He thanked Takao for his help, then shoved the used paper and the black pencil into Faoz's bag. He ushered Faoz and Ryu out of the broken door and fixed it roughly back in place.

"That was… quite something," Faoz said, the moment they were out. "What did those humans say, Fen? What are we doing now? And that thing they threw at Ryu, is he-"

"Okay!" Fen said, a little loud. He sat heavily on the stairs, feeling uncomfortably restless. His hand ached with the strange exercise he'd been forcing on it.

"Let's - let's see how Savi and Zephia are doing. Then I'll explain to all of you." He turned to Ryu, who was leaning faintly against a wall. "I can explain what happened to you too. But don't worry, you're fine."

Ryu nodded. "That'd be good," he said quietly. "Thanks."

To Fen's relief, Savi had done his job diligently. Zephia was soundly asleep in the middle of the ground floor.

"She started stirring recently, but I made a powder before she properly woke," Savi explained. "I was kinda worried how I'd stop her if she woke again, so I'm glad you're here."

When they shook Zephia awake, she seemed momentarily stuck in her previous state of fury. But as she saw the four of them surrounding her, her snarls faded and she asked politely, just like the others, what Fen had done in that room.

"I told you not to smash open the door," she said to Ryu. "I know what *they* are like. Those balls they have…"

"You could've told me earlier," Ryu protested. "But - I should've waited, it's true."

"What you did didn't help, Zephia," Fen said.

"I realise that," she said, then sighed. "What they did to Ryu just… set me off. I couldn't help it."

At this, Fen and Ryu exchanged an identical look. Zephia, admitting to a mistake? It was unheard of.

"So, what was that… thing they threw?" Ryu asked a moment later.

"I don't fully understand the science behind it," Fen said, "and what I'm remembering may well be wrong. But I think poké balls essentially convert the entire make-up of a Pokémon's body into a much smaller surface area. There, it's still alive but is in a sort of

frozen consciousness - a bit like being asleep. It stays like that until the button on the poké ball is pressed to release the Pokémon."

For a moment, they all tried to take in this miraculous invention. "What happened to Ryu, then?" Faoz asked.

"Well, a Pokémon can't be converted like that unless its energy is low enough; if it's been fighting, for example. Otherwise, it overwhelms the ball and destroys it, which is what Ryu managed."

Ryu nodded. "So, as long as we don't get too injured, we won't get caught in these balls?"

"Yes, but -"

"And if any of us don't break out of it, someone else can just free them, right? So-"

"Ryu!" Fen snapped, and the 'mon stopped at once. "We can't just dismiss them. Even if we could, humans might still possess things that are… far more dangerous. Poké balls aren't even designed to be used as weapons, not really."

"Are they always going to attack us, though?" Ryu asked. "Or was it just because I broke the door?"

"You don't-" Fen stopped and paused. "Let me just explain what I've learned. That should answer a few things."

Ryu understood, and they listened attentively to him summarise his conversation with Takao, using the written-on paper as reminders.

"Meteor Falls isn't far from here, but Takao warned us that going there - going anywhere, really - will be dangerous because of these 'feral' Pokémon."

"Nothing the five of us can't manage, I'm sure," Faoz said.

Fen smiled at her confidence. "Hopefully, yeah. So, as for humans: if what Takao said about every Pokémon here turning 'feral' is true, humans will be expecting us to act that way. And if they expect any 'mon they see to attack them, they'll probably do the same to us. We should try avoiding humans unless we really need to speak to one. Zephia, do you have any ideas how to…?"

He found Zephia was gazing at the floor. Only after a couple of seconds did she register the collective silence and look up. "Huh?"

"Do you have ideas on how to avoid humans seeing us?"

"Oh… same as 'mon, really. In fact, their eyes are probably worse, which makes it easier."

Fen hesitated. Something was very odd about her manner; something wrong with the cold, absolute focus he was used to seeing. "Well, anyway," he said, "we'll leave immediately if everyone's ready."

Everyone was. Really, he had a strong urge to curl up and rest after what they'd already experienced today, but he fought off the instinct. As the others seemed to do likewise, they gathered up their items and moved off.

Lost

Takao was right about the journey to Meteor Falls being difficult.

They had been attacked before even leaving Fallarbor, as a group of Zangoose leapt out from one rubble-filled corner and slashed madly with sharpened claws. Their victory was hardly a clean one: Zephia confused the Zangoose by transforming into one of them, leading to them ignoring Fen's group and just ripping into each other. They ran before the crazed Zangoose could realise.

They discussed using their scarves after that, but there was an eventual agreement not to. For one, they wanted to reach Meteor Falls as quickly as possible and trying to coordinate the scarves would take time. And though the wilds they faced were strong, few were in groups as large as theirs, and with a little teamwork they were able see them off. After the last experience Fen had had with a scarf, he was also hesitant to risk them at all.

But the worst part of the journey was in what he saw. Looking at Fallarbor from afar had disguised the extent of its damage; up close it revealed half-demolished buildings with smashed windows and broken doors; cars and the roads they stood on were no better. They passed torn-up Pokémon carcasses just left in the open, presumably killed in a fight. It worried him even more than before. How could Pokémon behave so savagely and reckless? Were Groudon and Kyogre, and the out-of-control climate, so powerful that they could induce this behaviour on their own?

Meteor Falls was, in spite of all this, an unexpectedly stunning sight. Its exterior was wild and jagged - the extent to which that was shaped by recent weather was difficult to determine - with gold-yellow rock glowing faintly in the evening dusk. The top of the cavern was open, and Fen could just make out the top of a waterfall along with a muffled crashing of water within.

Then he paused. *Have I been here before? Something seems very familiar… the waterfall, and the rocks, and those great dips in the ground that we've walked through… but I can't remember…*

He put that, and his tiredness, to one side. "To find the site of this meteor investigation," he told their group, "we need to find a place where the ground's been dug up. But it won't be quite the same as these natural craters. It'll be… man-made… however we can tell that." He frowned; this hadn't sounded so difficult in his head. Why hadn't he asked Takao for more specific instructions?

The cavern was dark inside, so he brightened his tail flame. There were more natural ground-dips, which echoed as dew from the ceiling fell into their puddles. The huge waterfall stood in the Falls' centre, with a wide river underneath splitting the land in two. He shook his head… what was he forgetting here?

"Hey." Zephia nudged him. "Do you think that's it?" She pointed to the right with her paw; Fen was glad for her night-vision. He moved his tail in line with her and his eyes lit up as bright as the flame.

Ahead of them was a hole several feet wide, stretching deep into the rocks. Directly above it was a small gap in the ceiling. A meteor had surely fallen there. Upon finding a set of rough man-made stairs carved into one side of the hole, and a couple of discarded human tools to the side of it, he knew for certain.

As they began descending, the amount of natural light fell even further, with Fen needing his tail to see anything at all. By holding it out in front and making it as big as possible, he could just make out the end of this second cave, which was encouraging. The area wasn't too large to search.

When everyone was down, he stopped them again. "We're looking for a fragment of rock that's black, shiny, and… unusual in ways that might become clear. I would've suggested we split up to do this faster, but there's so little light in here…"

"I can still see fine," Zephia said. "So I could search somewhere different to you 'mon that need light."

"That's what I'd have suggested," Faoz said. "No one else can see in the dark, right?"

Fen glanced at Ryu. "Uh… I'm not *that* good," he said sheepishly.

"That's okay, though," Faoz said. "If Zephia searches one side, the left, say, and we all use Fen's light to search the right? If anything attacks, I'm sure you could manage or at least call for help, Zephia."

As Zephia grunted in agreement, and no one else objected, they swiftly got moving.

Fen concentrated solely on shining his tail at unexplored rock, while the other three searched around him. They searched forensically, but it was exceedingly dull work and their complete lack of success only made them wearier. Occasionally Fen checked how Zephia was doing, but she returned the same disappointment. It was why, when Fen's tail *did* land upon something black and shiny in a wall, he gave a little yelp of surprise.

Their group instantly crowded around the tail. The object was about the size of Fen's fist, and its intense darkness stood out against the yellow rocks. "Whoa…" Ryu murmured, gazing wondrously. "You think this is a fragment of the rock?"

"Its colour fits the description," Fen said. "But I didn't expect to find it lodged in a wall. Or to be this big…"

He reached out to touch the rock, then hesitated. *It may react differently to Pokémon,* Takao had told him. Those Lanturn that attacked the other rocks had been brutally struck with fire and water…

But we have to try, at least! He reached out until his fingers just brushed the rock. Nothing happened, but it felt… odd. Softer than he

expected. That wasn't normal for rocks, was it? He wasn't an archaeologist, but-

The rock suddenly changed. From its centre a ring of scarlet appeared, and inside this was a vertical black slit. Fen stood frozen, waiting to see what the rock would do. The slit moved a little then stopped in line with his body. The whole rock turned black for a millisecond before returning to colour. His mind raced to try and understand. Rocks couldn't change colour…

Then something unseen screeched; the wall rumbled; the rock itself moved on its own, and the air between it and Fen suddenly became hazy, and confusing, and…

That thing's an eye-!

A psychic wave hit him, and he lost all coordination of his senses.

It took a few seconds to fight off the fuzziness in his mind. He felt his legs pushed against something solid, and slowly moved his arms so they could use it as a support. Things became clearer once he got to his feet. He was against a rock wall, but nothing was close-by - then he heard noise from the other side of the cave; the *right* side, where he'd just been. Had the attack - if it was an attack - thrown him that far?

Brightening his tail confirmed those suspicions. He saw Ryu, Faoz and Savi facing the wall, which now had a metre-high, crescent shaped gap in it. A rock of that size floated freely in the air above it, a glowing red-and-black eye at its centre.

Lunatone, he recognised. *It lives here! It's… unique to the Falls, I think, and there's another Pokémon here, what's its name…?*

Sensing a sudden movement behind him, he spun around. But as he did, the very wall he leant against exploded outwards, throwing him onto the ground again.

The smoke brought on by the rubble made him wheeze, then a paw yanked his arm and pulled him up, clearing his vision. There were his trio of allies next to him, Ryu with the supporting paw. Ahead, the Lunatone was accompanied by an orange, star-shaped Pokémon Fen had just been trying to visualise. *Solrock!*

The two floating 'mon were, unlike any wild he could remember, sitting completely still. "I've never seen these before," Faoz muttered across from him, "but they look like Rocks, which gives us a big advantage. I'll attack first to see what happens, then Savi, Ryu, follow up."

She immediately leapt onto all fours, then her cheeks inflated to the size of her head before they released a torrent of water, heading straight for the Lunatone.

Yet as she fired, Fen noticed the Solrock's body glow with white light. In front of the Lunatone's eye, where the water was going, it hit an invisible wall and fell harmlessly to the floor below the 'mon.

At once, Ryu lunged for the Solrock's spherical core, but the harm-free Lunatone glowed just as its ally had; Ryu cried out in pain as his fist hit a soundless barrier and bounced off.

Savi went for the Lunatone again, but thanks to the Solrock his sharpened leaves were met with the same ineffectual fate. Then before Fen could think about following, the ground around them seemed to ripple, and more rocks were torn flying from the cave walls. Luckily, the cave itself seemed to suffer the most; the rocks were so wildly distributed that only a few came close to hitting them.

As Fen looked up from the floor again, he saw both Rock 'mon's eyes glowing dangerously; but Faoz leapt up, using her tails like a propeller, and hit each 'mon with their water-covered ends. The two forms recoiled slightly, and Faoz landed beside him. Fen got an idea.

"We need to attack together-"

They'd both spoken at once. Fen waved the Floatzel on.

"Just - gather the other two. I'll keep these busy," she finished.

Fen nodded. Finding Ryu and Savi wasn't a challenge, since he'd seen where they attacked from. As he guided them back to him and Faoz, his mind momentarily went to Zephia - where was she? Perhaps she was fighting another 'mon?

Faoz didn't note this. "We want to overwhelm these 'mon," she said when they had regrouped, and she had hit both Pokémon with her tail again. "To attack at once, Fen and Ryu, you'll both need to use fists. Go for the star 'mon together. Savi, we'll go for the moon, but attack just before I do, alright?"

"Okay," Savi said. "When do we go?"

"When their eyes glow," Faoz said. "That's when they seem to attack, and no 'mon can attack and defend at the same time."

"We'll have to time it well," Fen added. Ryu's fists charged; Savi tensed himself; Faoz dropped to the ground again. And a moment later, the 'mon's forms lit up.

"NOW!"

Fen and Ryu punched together, and the Solrock shuddered backwards, its body's levitation dipping. Without waiting for a signal Ryu punched again, and Fen followed him up. The Solrock retaliated with a psychic attack that made Fen dizzy, but the fight was still a mismatch without its ally's defences. The Solrock could do nothing but take their punches, and it fell almost to the floor after Ryu's third force palm.

Fen risked a look behind him and saw the Lunatone's body receiving a similar pummelling from Faoz's mouth, as Savi paused so his leaves wouldn't get deflected in the blast. The water cut off for a second and the Lunatone screeched, a wounded, angry cry. The

Solrock joined in, creating a deafening sound that forced Fen to stop and cover his ears. Then he saw the two 'mon's bodies glowing, far more intense than before. They were quickly enveloped in the light.

He and Ryu exchanged a brief look of fear. Then the light exploded.

There was just time to throw himself into a ball. The whiteness was blinding, the sound deafening; rocks flew like an inferno around them.

When, after a period impossible to judge, everything dimmed again, he summoned enough energy to brighten his tail. Looking around, it took a few seconds to find the Solrock and Lunatone, lying on top of rubble that now littered the area. The light on their exteriors had gone out as suddenly and absolutely as their energy.

A paw landed on his shoulder and he jumped, but it was Faoz, together with Ryu and Savi. Like him they were bruised, tired, but well enough.

"You alright?" Faoz said to him. The ringing in his ears made her sound far away, but Fen nodded. "Those 'mon seem to have blown all their Psychic energy at once. Never seen that before. Crazy thing to do."

"What d'you think we should do now?" Ryu asked.

Faoz squinted. "Unfortunately, searching for that rock will be even more difficult with so much debris. Though I think we've already covered most of this place, between us four and Zephia."

A moment of silence. "Where is Zephia?" Fen said. "I haven't seen her since… before the Rock 'mon appeared." He shined his tail in a circle around the cave: nothing. "Should we call her name?"

"Not sure that's wise, given what we just fought," Faoz said. "I doubt Zephia would have been knocked out; I can only assume she went

looking elsewhere. She can see in the dark, so she'll still be able to find us, wherever she is."

"Should we go back the main room, then?" Savi said. "If we're giving up the search here…"

Fen couldn't think of a reason to disagree, and they began walking back. But he didn't feel convinced. Why wasn't Zephia here? Where would she go in Meteor Falls? It wasn't like she knew the place… unless…

Suddenly, everything clicked. Fen remembered what Zephia had told him, some time ago now, about her home. A waterfall ran through the centre… the rocks were a strange yellow colour… there were occasional craters that she didn't understand, and an opening at the top of the cave…

She lived - here! In Meteor Falls! That's what I couldn't remember, not one of my old memories, but what she told me! If she snuck out of this cave, then… she probably knows where her home is!

He turned to the others. "I know why she's gone," he said. "I need to find her."

"What?" Faoz said. "How do you-"

There was no time to waste. "Just stay here!" Fen ordered them. "I'll come back."

Ignoring his aching limbs, he ran through the Falls' main area, leaving the others at the cavern steps. Past that was a dead end, so he crossed a wooden bridge over the big river, almost falling through a ripped hole in the middle. Now there were two paths; on his left the ground sloped downwards via a series of ledges. No: Zephia had spoken like she'd seen the Falls' waterfall a lot, and living down that path would take her far away from it. He turned to the right path, which ended with a metre-high tunnel carved into a rock. Zephia's

family *would* have lived somewhere difficult to find. He scrambled through the tunnel.

It led into a wider area, and he called "ZEPHIA!" as loud as possible. A Zubat heard him and latched onto his neck, its fangs producing some fluid which numbed the area fast. Alarmed, Fen drew fire into his foot and kicked wildly upwards, which thankfully did enough to throw the thing off. Wary not to shout again, he searched every new area as quickly as he could and crawled through every little tunnel that appeared. They soon became too small for all but the supplest of humans.

Streams ran all the way through the Falls, and at one point he walked straight into a mini waterfall. In his panic, he slipped and was soaked with the icy current, but he gritted his teeth and carried on. The caves here were colder and darker but more beautiful too; ice crystals reflected his tail light onto the walls in mesmerising patterns.

He found Zephia's home without realising. What once must have been an entrance had been reduced to rubble, but most of the cave's low ceiling remained. There, barely a few feet away, facing the cave's opposite wall, was the Zorua. And Fen knew immediately that he shouldn't be here; Zephia's body shook feverishly, hunched over as if her legs couldn't support her. Aside from them, the cave was empty.

He felt a nudge and found Ryu standing breathlessly next to him. Fen guessed he'd followed the tail, and Ryu must have understood the situation exactly as he did, because he didn't move or make a sound.

But then Fen's foot accidently dislodged a stone, and Zephia seemed to turn around in slow motion. For a moment, much like himself, she seemed unable to move. Her eyes were raw, face damp with tears.

"YOU!" she screamed at him. "What - what do you want?! Can't you j-just leave me alone? For once?"

"Zephia," Fen began - but what could he say? "You disappeared, and I realised that… this was that place you talked about, and-"

"Of course it was!" she cried. "Why are you here?! You don't just… walk into Pokémon's homes! If m-my parents were here now, you'd… you'd be attacked, you stupid idiot!"

Fen had a feeling that whatever he said next would make things worse, but he still wanted to try. Not least because Zephia was struggling through tears, and he couldn't bear to see it.

"Look… I understand how awful this is for you, and I'm so sorry. But-
"

"Don't lie to me!" Zephia snarled. "You probably - you probably knew all along, didn't you, that they'd never be here? Maybe they got captured by your *scum* too, or maybe they're dead, or maybe they've just become these crazed beasts like everyone else… I should never have told you *anything* ! You were too clever… all I've been is a stupid puppet, doing whatever you wanted, when you knew full well that I'd never see them again, you… you-!"

"Zephia, please!" Ryu said, stepping out of the shadows. "Fen always knew as little as you or me, we both know that!"

She bared her fangs at him, but stayed silent. Ryu continued.

"We came here because, well… I really care about you. I don't want to leave you on your own. I… I know you've suffered so much, I mean, I can see it when you're sleeping, or when you're reminded of your home… you hide it, but I can tell it's there. I think you're… one of the bravest 'mon I've ever met, Zephia. You've helped me, both of us, so many times, and you never want thanks, and you know why I think that is? Because… well, that's what friends would do for each other."

Zephia made a noise between a cry and a growl. "Stop it!" she said. "I never cared about either of you! I only did this for myself and my

parents, and, and…" She shook her head a thousand more times. "Agggggh! Get *out* !"

"Just tell me that you'll stay with us!" Fen said, slightly pleadingly. "Please, we need your help to stop the natural disasters! If we can do that, there's a chance-"

" *If?* " she spat. "You have no idea how to stop them - none of us do! This place was supposed to be it, wasn't it? I even helped you in that cave, but what is there? Nothing!"

Unless Faoz and Savi had miraculously found something, Fen had to concede that she was correct. He didn't know where they'd go now.

Ryu started speaking again, then stopped as Zephia's whole body started rippling with a crimson aura, the same colour that tinted her fur.

"I told you to go!" she said. "I'm warning you!"

Fen had half a mind to follow her orders, particularly as he had never seen Zephia do this before. Ryu, however, stood his ground defiantly.

The aura surrounding Zephia grew and concentrated into her front paws. She raised them, seemingly to thump them down again, but they just hung, shaking, in the air. She looked at them both, for a final time, before the aura disappeared and she darted out of a broken side of the cave.

Neither Fen nor Ryu moved for second. Then Ryu swore, but Fen grabbed his arm before he could start running.

"She wanted to be left alone. And she's probably the best Pokémon at hiding in the world. We won't find her."

After a brief struggle, Ryu's pull on his arm receded. His whole body sagged. "I can't believe she's just… *gone*," he murmured.

"She put so much hope on finding her parents," Fen said. "When that disappears… I can understand her reaction. I don't know what I'd do if the same happened to me."

"I guess," Ryu said. "I just thought… I guess it's stupid to say now, but… I thought she was starting to help us because she *wanted* to…"

"Yeah, I did too."

Fen, thinking about how emotional Zephia had been, realised something else. *Zephia can't be very old. I don't know if her species evolves, but even if not, I doubt she's much older than Ryu. She must've been only a kid when she got captured. Ryu was right; for all the toughness she had, she was fragile too. To manage everything she did, despite that… I wish we could've helped her more.*

They didn't encounter anything on the way to the main entrance, and Savi and Faoz thankfully reported the same. Explaining to them what had happened, though, and their subsequent looks of disbelief, was a different matter.

They sat just outside the Falls that night, an overhanging rock above sheltering them from rain. Though they couldn't find enough sticks for a fire, they managed to jam one thick branch between some rocks and light it, providing a little protection against the freezing cold. It became apparent that neither Faoz or Savi had really known a thing about Zephia, so that night around the makeshift flames, Fen and Ryu told the other two everything; how they'd met her, her story and why she was gone. Reliving it all didn't make either of them feel better.

"She had an Entei's heart," Faoz murmured afterwards. "I hope she can be happy, whatever she does now."

It was in a tired, miserable state that Fen got ready to sleep. There had been little discussion of their plans for tomorrow, but he knew that there was none other than return to Fallarbor and fly to the

location of the Groudon and Kyogre rocks, if the rocks were even still there, in the hope that they would hold something invaluably useful. From the account Takao had given them though, the rocks seemed more likely to kill them than provide anything positive. And other than that, they were just as hopeless as all those humans had been.

Fen buried his face further into his fur. *What was this all for?* he thought despairingly. *Why did I become a Pokémon, why did I come all this way… it can't just end here! There must be something…* something *else that we can do…*

He fell asleep before that *something* became a reality. And the town in his dreams appeared again.

But this time it was different; the image was clearer, and it didn't feel like he was merely observing the place; he was *there* . He stood in a small field, facing away from it towards the sea. A glut of buildings blocked most of his view, but they were dwarfed by the two enormous beings in the water itself, lunging and roaring at each other. He was transfixed in terror, not noticing the woman nearby until she shook his arm.

"Come with me!" she said, shouting above an awful din of screams, both from humans and Pokémon, emergency alarms and Groudon and Kyogre themselves. He turned to her now; she was short in height, not young but not lethargic either. She waved her arms frantically away from the field. "I don't know what's happening, but we need to get far away! There's space in my car, come on!"

As he was about to follow her, he noticed the gate to the field had been left open. A 10-strong group of Pokémon were streaming out, yelping in fear.

"The Pokémon!" he exclaimed. "T-they're getting out through the gate!"

"What-" the woman briefly glanced behind her, then shook him again. "Forget about the Pokémon! My car's just here-" She started

leading him away through the gate too, but his eyes were fixed on the tiny figures. Cars were already hurtling down the street, away from the city and the sea, but the Pokémon, led by a Zigzagoon, were terrified by this and veered away right onto a footpath. They were too small to notice that it led straight towards the sea. He glanced up; Groudon and Kyogre were moving closer to the shore.

The moment they ran through the gate, he shook off the woman's grip and sprinted down the same path as the Pokémon. A rumbling noise appeared, strangely disconnected from everything - he didn't seem to notice it.

"Cubbs! Iffi!" he cried, hoping the Pokémon would hear their names and come back to him. But he could barely hear himself, and the 'mon certainly didn't. He was getting nearer, but so was the sea and the legendaries, and there were too many Pokémon to carry anyway, and he felt about to lose his footing, and the rumbling was getting louder, and, and-

He was awake. Rumbling was all he could hear until it deafened him, then he could hear no more. Several arms grabbed hold of him, and he couldn't have resisted their pulls even if he'd tried. Only his mind seemed to function, but even that was slow to comprehend. Then the tremors disappeared; he managed to breathe.

An earthquake. Somehow, unimaginably worse than the one at Arkan.

He regained a morsel of strength, enough to prop his head up from the ground. Around him were the three Pokémon he valued so much, all gripping each other, and him, for stability.

They'd moved away from the high rock - that must have been why they'd pulled him - though their fire-stick and a bag, Faoz's, were still sitting there. Now without a roof, they were fully exposed to the unyielding rain, and it stung as soon as Fen realised that it should.

He coughed, and said, "Why did you pull-"

Two things happened. Faoz seemed to realise she'd left her bag, and gingerly got up to retrieve it. Fen had been looking at the high rock absent-mindedly, but in the same instant its connection to the main cave cracked, then was severed entirely. The giant chunk plummeted into where they'd just sat with a crash almost equal in volume to the earthquake. If Faoz had taken a step further, she would have been crushed. She stood before the fallen rock, motionless.

That was why.

"M-my bag," Faoz gasped, so quietly that the words were almost lost in the rain. She peered around the rock, perhaps in some desperate hope of lifting it up, but it had already sunk several feet into the cave formation, taking with it the ground below. She almost collapsed against it.

"At least… we weren't underneath," Ryu said. He nudged Savi's head. "You realised the danger, 'mon. You probably saved us all."

Savi said nothing, even when Fen expressed a similar gratitude. His head was withdrawn, body shaking slightly.

"Savi?" Fen said. "You okay?"

"Well… *I* am," Savi sniffed. "But the Electrics won't be, will they? Not once this hits…"

He looked on the verge of breaking down, and neither Fen or Ryu knew what to do; but then he made a little growl and lifted his head up. "C'mon… if Zephia was here, she'd be screaming at me," he murmured. "Maybe she had a point."

"Yes, she did," Faoz said, turning to face them. "Right now, we have no control over what happens in Kyunn. We might as well be the only Pokémon in the world. I know it's hard," she looked at Savi, "because there are 'mon I care about too. We all have them. But dwelling on what-ifs is the worst thing we can do."

Savi nodded, eyes defiant. His leaves were withdrawn, rather than covering himself like the previous night.

"Ryu," Faoz said, turning to him. "You still have your bag?"

"Yeah." It was on his back; Fen doubted that it was ever removed.

"What's left?"

Fen shone his tail close so Ryu could see. "A little bit of food," he said, "a water flask, my rock, our scarves… uh, that's about it."

Faoz made a sigh that was like disappointment, sadness and plain exhaustion rolled into one.

"The sitrus berries, the seeds… I suppose it could've been worse, but…" She trailed off, gazing around them. "Oh well, it's gone… we'd better find shelter now…"

"The cave?" Ryu offered.

"No," Fen said, even though he wished beyond anything that the Falls was a viable place. "Lunatone and Solrock are active at night, I think. It's too dangerous."

"But there's nowhere else," Ryu said, and it was true. The ground here was high and unshielded.

"Can't we just… huddle together?" Savi said. "It gives us *something…* "

So with little other choice, they leant against the top of the fallen boulder. Fen made his tail as small as possible and held it to his chest so they could form a compact ball of warmth, with him in the centre given his extra vulnerability.

In the shape of this latest setback, his thoughts again drifted to the bleakness of their situation, the longing to work out his past, work out the vision he kept seeing-

My vision! A jolt of energy coursed through him, making his tail flare briefly. He'd seen that same scene of Groudon and Kyogre, but more of it this time - there was a woman, and Pokémon he was chasing after, and he'd heard himself speak, and call the Pokémon names, and - he was running towards the sea when a rumbling - it must've been the earthquake, that was why it felt so alien at the time - had woken him up, and he'd forgotten all about it, but now…

There was no doubting it; they had to go the place he'd seen. Of course! Something about that day, that event, was vitally important. Why else would he have kept seeing it happen? It was just like the emotion attacks: they had a message behind them. He tried to remember every detail of it, though this caused a familiar aching. But through gritted teeth and clenched fists, he saw the field he'd stood in, the urbanised city overlooking the sea, the steep footpaths he'd run down… only no names.

"Everyone!" he said urgently. None of the huddled Pokémon had fallen asleep, and they were instantly attentive as he explained his idea.

Once he'd finished, Faoz said, "So… we need to go back to Fallarbor, and ask the humans where this place is?"

"Yes, I think so. Hopefully what I can remember is enough to go on."

"But… this place could be anywhere, right?" Savi said. "What if it's in the opposite corner of Hoenn to us?"

"Even then, Shaice will be better now," Faoz answered. "As long as Hoenn isn't absurdly large - which from what I can tell, it isn't - and as long as we know where we're going, we should find it. The only concern I have is whether it's where we *need* to go."

"Nothing that Fen's… *mind* has told us so far has been on the wrong track," Ryu said. "I trust that this one's the same."

"Right!" Fen said. He felt like a little ember of hope had been lit in his heart; they *could* do this, they could find whatever it was he was searching for, and with some luck they even could do it tomorrow. He turned to Ryu, and the 'mon's smile told the same story, and that warmed him even more.

There was a long, collective silence, like a relieved exhale.

"In all our previous despair," Faoz said wryly, "we forgot to have someone keep watch. I-"

"You watched yesterday, Faoz," Savi said.

"I didn't do anything then," Ryu added.

"Given how I was before-"

"It's only fair that I-"

"Oh, you can both watch!" Faoz said loudly. "In turns. Ryu, since you can see a little better in the dark you should go first. Swap over halfway to dawn, you should know how it works."

Ryu and Savi agreed on that, and the former took up a position overlooking the landscape. As he was about to curl up again, Faoz caught Fen's eye. She said nothing, but had a look which said, *"Funny what a little hope can do, eh?"*

Three

There was a renewed vigour in their travelling the following morning. Their depleted supplies didn't deter them; they knew the route to Fallarbor well now, the types and strategies of the wilds, and fought through it all. Fen's worries about whether the new plan really would bear fruit were suppressed, overrun by a complete focus and determination. Even though swathes of the forest between Meteor Falls and Fallarbor had fallen in the wake of the earthquake, he had seen so much destruction already that he felt almost desensitised to it all.

It wasn't until they reached the town that he was forced to stop for thought.

Fallarbor's houses had become so crushed that he almost wondered if Groudon itself had walked over them. Before the earthquake it had at least resembled a town. Now…

What if the Pokémon Centre collapsed too? What if… what if it's too late to speak to the people again?

They hurried through the town, through its ever-present volcanic ash, fighting off a couple of leaf-slashing Nuzleaf on the way. The Pokémon Centre was, thankfully, still standing, but a chunk in the top-right corner had collapsed, taking with it whole windows and light fittings. The remains of its roof balanced precariously.

Climbing over a small mountain of debris revealed that the glass entrance doors had been replaced with a barricade of chairs. Fen heard faint noises from inside and could tell they were sounds of distress. *They probably heard us. How do I tell them I'm not a wild?*

Peering underneath a gap between two chairs - most of the cardboard covering windows was no more, so plenty of light filtered into the room - he made out a man and a woman, neither

recognisable. They were muttering in panicked tones. Like outside, the floor was littered with rubble, holes and cracks.

Fen knocked on a chair leg and both people spun to the sound immediately, the woman squealing. He showed his face and put his hands up to indicate peace, as he had done previously, and they calmed down. They discussed something mutedly, but neither made a move to let him inside.

Fen huffed. "Could someone pass me a paper and pencil?" he asked their group.

A pause. "They were in the other bag," Faoz said. "Sorry."

They just had *to be…* As Fen tried to think of an alternative to smashing through the chairs, he heard footsteps and a few moments later, Takao's face appeared in the room. He looked even more cut than before, and his shirt appeared to have been discarded in order to tie parts around his blood-stained arm and thigh. He shouted an order at the two people behind, who promptly disappeared from view, then limped over to the chairs and let Fen inside.

An odd few seconds passed, neither of them able to communicate. Another call came from what had been the stairs - its spiral structure had collapsed halfway up. The women from before was holding writing materials from a platform disconnected from the bottom. Takao walked over and took them off her.

"Fen," Faoz put a paw on his shoulder. "I don't think you'll need me here, so I'm going to check on Shaice. Save some time."

Though Fen sensed her motivations were slightly stronger than just efficiency, he agreed. "Okay. Meet us back here when you're ready."

She nodded, then disappeared.

Takao wrote, *"Did you make it to Meteor Falls? What did you find? I notice that the rare Zorua is no longer with you - did she do*

something important?"

They knew who she was! Fen thought instantly, before telling himself to calm down. *It's not like anyone would be looking for her… and even if they were, that hardly matters now…*

"The Zorua left for unrelated reasons," he replied. *"We did make it to the Falls, but found nothing relating to those rock fragments. However, last night I realised something else that I hadn't thought of."*

He quickly explained his recurring dream. He described the scenery as best as he could remember, then asked Takao if he knew where it was.

"Unfortunately I'm not from Hoenn, so I'm not the most reliable for directions. I can find someone better though."

Takao took a few steps towards the stairs, then turned back and wrote again. *"Come with me. It'll be easier."*

Ryu and Savi started following Fen, but Takao quickly stopped him. *"Only you should come."*

So with a sigh, Fen explained to the others that they had to stay put. Ryu in particular looked annoyed, but didn't argue.

Where the stairs were cracked in two, Takao made the jump himself, using what remained of the handrail for support. Fen's hands stuck to the metal surface more easily.

The first floor was just as fractured as the one below it, but it was awash with people, massed in the hall and doorways of rooms. The food court, Fen assumed, had been unsaveably damaged in the earthquake. A number of people squealed at the sight of him, but Takao told them firmly to be calm as he explained the situation. While he consulted with people Fen could only stand back, frustrated by how useless he was.

The professor eventually replied, *"There are three cities I can think of that overlook the sea: Slateport, Lilycove and Mossdeep. None are close-by, so I wouldn't know if Groudon and-"*

Fen had stopped reading. *Lilycove.* The name felt like a firecracker in his head; the sudden conviction he had was so strong that he shivered. *That* was where he'd been!

"Lilycove. That's where it was, I'm certain. I just remembered."

Takao frowned. *"Is that how your amnesia works?"*

"I don't really know how it works," Fen wrote impatiently.

Takao consulted again. *"Well, the problem with Lilycove is that it's a long, long way on foot, and that's on top of the problem with wilds."*

"But we don't need to travel on foot. The Salamence that carried us from Kyunn-" he scribbled that out, " *-Emritia can take us. All we need are the directions there."*

Takao's eyes lit up as he read. *"Of course. I'll try working it out."*

Another few minutes of frustrating gibberish later, the professor said, *"We think it's pretty much directly east - that's straight ahead from the side of this Pokémon Centre facing Mt. Chimney. But I'm worried that you'll drift off track, especially since you're likely to have a storm in the time it takes to fly. We're looking for any maps or compasses to help."*

Compasses… Fen indicated that they wait, then ran to the stairs. "Ryu, do we still have our compass?"

"Uh… I haven't moved it," Ryu said, rummaging inside his bag. Moments later, he pulled out a battered little square of wood, the thin arrow of metal contained within still intact. "Here. D'you think it still works?"

"Which way does it say east is?" Fen asked.

Ryu held the compass away from him, quite needlessly, then read it. He pointed to the side of the building facing the ruined part of town. "This way."

Fen smiled. "Then it still works." He turned back and found Takao watching them intensely, a curiousness in his eyes.

"You have a compass?" he asked.

"Yeah. If Lilycove is straight east then that's all we need, right?"

Takao hesitated. *"Where did you obtain that?"*

Fen thought about it. It was Faoz who'd given it to them, so long ago now… had she made it? He'd never asked.

"They're made in Emritia somewhere. I don't know by who."

Takao didn't immediately reply, but his surprise and - was it scepticism? - was clear to see. That irritated Fen; did he not believe Pokémon were intelligent enough to create them? If their travels of Kyunn - it *was* Kyunn, he couldn't call it anything else - had taught him one thing, it was just how clever they were. Not in the same terms as humans, perhaps, but certainly in their ability to construct towns and settlements side-by-side with nature, taking advantage of their natural inclinations.

"Very well," Takao said eventually. *"Map-wise, that should be all you need. Unless there's something else?"*

Fen had another thought. *"About how far is Lilycove from here?"*

Takao consulted briefly. *"About 100 miles, we think. There's actually another town directly east*, *called Fortree. It looks very different to Lilycove, much smaller, but it stands about halfway between here and the city, so don't be fooled if you find it first."*

It had been so long since anyone mentioned a mile to Fen, he struggled to put that number into context. 100 would certainly be

enormous for someone to walk, but with Shaice-

Suddenly there was an almighty crash of chairs from downstairs; the simultaneous yelp of people was almost as loud. Expecting danger, Fen ran to the stairs, but the only thing new in the room was Faoz.

"Where is he?" she demanded breathlessly of Ryu and Savi, who were both trying to calm her down.

Fen jumped down from the stairs. "Faoz!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing? You can't just-"

Their eyes met then, and Faoz almost launched herself at him, gripping him with both paws, so close that their muzzles were touching.

"I need something, anything… Shai is, well - I was stupid to think an injured 'mon would be safe here after what you said - should've stayed with him, no one would've attacked then-"

"Faoz, could you explain-"

"HE MIGHT DIE HERE!" she howled, then let go of him and howled her own, wordless cry, like it were an untameable beast from inside her. Her words were mixed with sobs. "Something has torn him up, he's bleeding, he's - oh, *please* ! Anything they have here, please ask, just…"

"Okay!" Fen said. "I'll… I'll ask." He realised that their paper was still upstairs. "Faoz, just wait here, and you two-"

"I'm not leaving him on his own!"

"Well - go to him, then!" Her anxiety was rubbing off on Fen. He looked at Savi and Ryu desperately. "If one of you-"

"I'll go with her," Savi said, immediately understanding. "We'll meet you there."

As Savi helped Faoz stumble out of the door, the room fell quiet again, which Fen was glad for; people were far more likely to listen to him if they weren't fearing for their lives. He turned to Ryu, who looked quite lost.

"I'll just wait here, then," Ryu mumbled.

"Please," Fen said.

A few people's heads had been poking around the staircase, but they retreated the moment Fen headed back towards them. There was a solid block of people in the hall now, not daring to move closer to him. He held out his empty hands impatiently. *You won't be scared if I just explain what happened!*

Takao appeared out of a doorway then, and quickly passed him writing materials. Fen explained the situation and asked if they had anything to heal Pokémon - oran berries or something similar.

The way Takao's face fell told him the answer immediately. *"We threw all this place's Pokémon food out some time ago. Medicines, too. We were scared it would work as bait to bring ferals here. It's not even worth checking, because we searched the place thoroughly."*

For some reason this dismissal made Fen furious; he had to stop himself growling. *"You could at least ask people! Please, this is desperate!"*

So reluctantly, Takao turned and asked the question, also urging the people to be calm. There was a few seconds of silence, and then a girl from a corner of the hall stood up. Fen was startled by how young she looked, surely no older than 15. Her hair was tied with a tattered red bow, which seemed only there to prevent it looking any wilder. In her hand was a yellow rucksack.

She took tentative steps towards Fen - he expected someone to have stopped her or tugged her back, but the girl appeared to have no family. She said something quietly to Takao, who stared at her

and gave a whispered exclamation. After a few more words, she reached into her bag and pulled out two plastic bottles, each filled with a purplish substance.

She wrote, hurriedly, *"Someone's hurt, right? Would potions still be useful? I kept them with me because I came here as a trainer, but then my Pokémon ran away, but I kept these hidden even when everything was thrown out because they don't have a smell, and just in case my Marshtomp came back… if you can use them I suppose that's still something good?"*

Reading the message, Fen immediately felt more sympathy for the girl than any human he'd met so far. She cared a great deal for her Pokémon and had taken risks just to hold onto the memories of them, despite her obvious fear.

He remembered very little about potions, but would have accepted anything. *"They're something. Thank you."*

He picked up one and examined the uneven bottle shape. He had no recollection of how it worked or even what it was. The girl sensed this and laughed nervously. She showed him the nozzle at the top, which when pressed sprayed a healing substance. They could be applied to wounds or just ingested, though that only helped for matters like fatigue. And they only worked on Pokémon, unsurprisingly.

Fen glanced at Takao again, and the knots around the man's arms reminded him of something else. *"Do you have anything more basic to treat wounds? Bandages, maybe?"*

Takao hesitated to answer, and a few seconds later the girl snatched the paper out of his hand. *"Yes, a little."*

She disappeared into a room and returned moments later with a roll of bandage. Desperate to move on now, Fen just took them and the potions, gave her the most grateful smile he could, then rushed back downstairs.

After explaining to Ryu what happened, they ran to the edge of town where Shaice had rested. When they found the Dragon a few minutes later, thankfully encountering no wilds, the sight was as bad as Fen had feared.

Shaice was flat on his stomach; Fen guessed that was the only part of him uninjured. His once-majestic wings had great slashes all over; trails of blood had run down onto the grass from them, as well as from his back and tail. Faoz was hugging the Dragon's head as if it was her last grip on the world. When she hesitantly moved away, Fen saw that this was the worst area of all. Three of the fins on Shaice's face had been severed entirely, another bent in half, while his eyes were so gashed that they seemed shut out of necessity, not choice.

"I don't have berries, but there's something else which can help," Fen said, holding up the potions and bandages. He looked doubtfully at the bottles, which were barely the size of his fist. "Faoz, I don't know if we'll have enough of this to treat everything. We might just have to focus on the worst areas."

Faoz nodded, but seemed so overcome with emotion now that she couldn't speak. So Fen, seeing no other option, kneeled next to Shaice and spoke directly to him.

"Shaice, I have a spray that can heal you, but only a limited supply of it. If you can tell me which part of your body hurts the most, I can start there."

"My eyes," Shaice said at once, his voice a quiet rasp. They were the first words Fen had ever heard from him.

Fen nodded and raised the bottle above the area. "This… might hurt a lot."

Shaice's roar of agony the moment the spray touched him told its own story. His head lurched so violently that Fen had to jump back, then it hit the ground with a *thump.*

"I-I'm sorry… I didn't-"

"No," Shaice murmured. "Do it again. Please. Hold me down if you have to."

So Ryu put his arms around the top of the Dragon's huge neck, and Savi found a branch, then several more when that one was broken, to lodge in his mouth to subdue the cries. Fen sprayed Shaice's eyes until the first bottle had nearly been emptied. The effect, while not quite miraculous, was a big improvement. The cuts were no longer bloody, though their swelling was enormous. Shaice's eyelids opened a few millimetres, and his sclera were crimson, almost purple in colour. Even those tiny slits contained an overwhelming amount of emotion; pain and fear, but great relief too.

"Thank you," Shaice said simply. "You have more?"

"Yes. Where…?"

"My throat, neck…" Shaice winced again. "Can hardly breathe."

Using the same procedure, Fen sprayed the wounds until they were as clean as possible.

"I have a half a bottle left," he said to Shaice. "Do you want me to try spraying all over, or is there a specific area?"

"Ignore my wings," Shaice said. "I can survive without them."

Fen realised what he was implying and looked again, horrified, at the ruined wings. Ryu said, "*Y*-you'll still be able to fly, won't you? Once… this heals, I mean…"

"Riolu," Shaice said, "I do not know. But my wings certainly cannot function without the rest of me alive."

"We can still bandage them," Fen said; though he could only hope what they had was enough. He got ready to spray again. "Once more, Shaice…"

The remaining potion mainly just stemmed the wounds' bleeding. Then Fen, Ryu and Savi got to work on the bandages. The sheer bulk of Shaice not only made this very difficult, but meant they had to exclude several more minor cuts just to save the limited bandage they had. Faoz had somewhat snapped out of the daze she was in now, using her water to help clean some of the wing wounds. Though once this was done, she went back to hugging Shaice's head.

Finally, they finished bandaging. Fen and the others sat next to Faoz. The situation had exhausted them.

"Shaice, or Faoz," Fen began. "How… did this happen to you?"

Faoz looked to Shaice for the explanation, and the Dragon didn't hesitate.

"It was last night. A group of Scyther, there must have been six or seven. I needed a long rest after the flight, so was unaware of their approach. But when they attacked, the pain it inflicted almost instantly was…" He paused. "I don't know why they didn't stop. My flesh is not edible, so killing me would be of no worth."

"How *did* they stop?" Ryu asked.

"I tried to fight, but I eventually had no choice but to lay down and pretend I was dead. Even then, they continued a little longer before moving on." The corners of his mouth quivered in what might have been a smile, and he addressed Fen, Ryu and Savi. "Alas, I am still here. And that spray, however you obtained it, may well have saved my life. It is not custom for my kind to converse with any of you… but I must make an exception now. You three deserve all the respect and thanks I can possibly offer."

The words barely registered to Fen. He stared at the floor, a familiar hopeless feeling building.

Takao told me about how savage Pokémon were behaving… I should've realised that Shaice would be in danger out in the open, but I didn't and now he can't fly us anywhere, might never even fly again. I've spent so long wondering blindly where we need to go, and just when I thought it was finally within reach…

"Hey! Fen…" Ryu was shaking him, but his voice had a gentler tone of concern. "Now's not the time to disappear on us, 'mon. What's wrong?"

"What happened was my fault," Fen murmured, unable to look Shaice in the eye. "I should've expected this after what I was told about the wilds…"

"We all knew about them, though!" Savi said. "And… why would we expect anything to attack a 'mon when he's resting? That's not what happens, especially with Dragons-"

"Because these aren't normal wilds, Savi!" he cried. "They don't want to fight us, they want to kill us!"

"Fen." Faoz spoke for the first time in a long while. "Be easy on yourself. If anyone's to blame, it's me. I echo everything Shai has said; what you just did was outstanding. All three of you."

Fen looked sadly at her and shook his head. "It's more than that… Just before you appeared, Faoz, I figured out where we need to go. It's a long way, but that wasn't a problem a few minutes ago, because I was relying on Shaice flying us. But now…"

"You will still make it there," Shaice said. "Believe in yourself. Faoz has told me about your travels."

"Glyciak was different-"

"Yes, because you're incomparably stronger now," Faoz said. Somehow, she had found her composure again. "You had to learn how to hunt, yes? So you won't die of starvation. You know where

you're going - that's crucial. You don't have any berries, but you don't-"

"What if we're in a situation like Shaice's?" Fen demanded. "There's no way we're getting out of that!"

"You have the *scarves*," Faoz said urgingly. "If you use them correctly, I would give you a very good chance."

As Fen looked sceptically at her, she continued. "The three of you are as well suited to them than any team I could've compiled. Let me show you. Pass me the bag, Ryu."

Ryu did so, and she took out the scarves, examining them briefly, before passing one to each of the Pokémon in turn.

"I've seen how all of you fight, and I know these scarves very well," she said. "I agree with you Fen, that this will be a challenging journey; it would be foolish to send you out without a proper battle strategy. So: if you find yourself in a tricky situation, here's what you should do…"

Faoz had a knack of consistently amazing Fen. He had always used as much strategy as possible in fights, but what he'd learnt was still far off her abilities - her depths of knowledge seemed endless. Ryu in particular was rapt listening, growing increasingly excited and optimistic as she went on. The only downside to the scarves was that, due to their power, they weren't able to practice before a real enemy necessitated them.

When she had finished, Savi spoke. "I suppose you're not coming with us, Faoz."

"No," Faoz said sadly. "No, I must stay here. I'm sure you understand why."

Fen knew. *Even forgoing how important Shaice is to her, we might still need him if he recovers, and…* he realised with a jolt, *Shaice is*

our only route back to Kyunn. What if he really can't fly again? Even if, somehow, we managed to save things here, everyone might be stuck on Hoenn forever… I hope it doesn't come to that…

"But Faoz," Savi protested, "you're stronger than any of us, you don't have to stay here! I'll look after Shaice, I can-"

Faoz held up a decisive paw. "I appreciate the intention, but no. I'm not as youthful and full of energy as you think; that's why I stopped exploring, after all. It should be you three. Trust me."

Savi exchanged looks with Fen and Ryu, neither of whom could dispute Faoz. "In that case," Savi said, "thanks for everything you've done for me… we'll make sure this wasn't all for nothing."

"Shaice too," Fen added. "Thanks, both of you, for believing what I said, and taking us here, and all the help you gave us on Kyunn."

Faoz nodded graciously to both, eyes glowing.

"Thanks, Faoz," Ryu said with a wry smile. "See ya after we save the world?"

Faoz smiled back at that and she held a paw out for Ryu to slap, like how his species greeted each other.

Spits of rain started falling as they walked through Fallarbor for the last time, but rather than irritate Fen it made him remember, just in time, an idea he'd had the previous day. He'd seen an umbrella in a corner of the Pokémon Centre's ground floor, though the observation had flown over his head at first sight. Fortunately, after sneaking inside the building unnoticed, it was exactly where he remembered.

He briefed Ryu and Savi about what it did - they both 'wowed' when he opened it - and they agreed it was valuable. The umbrella was an inconspicuous black, and though it had to poke out of Ryu's bag when not being used, the fact it was big enough for all of them to shelter underneath was a worthy trade-off.

Faoz had told them at Meteor Falls that they might as well be the only Pokémon left in the world. While Fen knew that was motivational hyperbole, there were times in the following days where it felt accurate.

They'd started on the most direct route east, which took them through the solidified lava that had decimated half of Fallarbor. Unfortunately, despite being some weeks old the lava hadn't cooled sufficiently; Fen didn't mind it, but Savi and Ryu said it was far too hot to walk on. That forced them to find another way across. Knowing very little about what was inland, they went back out to the forest where they'd first landed, but even here they had to occasionally skirt or hop around areas of hot liquid.

Most of the wilds that attacked were Fires, presumably furious at their destroyed habitats. Given they could use the areas of hardened lava to their advantage, Fen often had to take charge in these fights, and Savi had a difficult time.

Strangely, Fen had no dreams or any sort of interrupted sleep in these days; he wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or worried at the lack of guidance.

But eventually the lava disappeared for good, then the trees, and they crossed a small mountain pass. They were so focused on making ground that they didn't pause until the terrain had softened, the air shot up in humidity, and there was suddenly nothing in sight but a yellowish dust and white sand.

"Uh… did we go the wrong way?" Ryu said. "Where are we?"

Fen squinted; the horizon was dazzling. "A desert, it looks like." He checked the compass: still east. "We're going the right way, so… I suppose we'll have to walk through it."

Ryu was squinting too. "I can hardly see a thing… what's with all these dust clouds? I thought we'd passed the volcano."

Fen shrugged. "There'll probably be extreme weather wherever we go."

The desert was like another world. The sand around them rose up and down in giant ripples, and they had to move quickly at parts when it was deep enough to consume their whole bodies. They went on like this for a while, then as they were midway up a sand dune, a blast of wind took the top of it off. Fen had to shield his face against the rush of particles; like a sharper form of rain.

The sandstorm blew with such ferocity that his feet started sinking as he tried to stay upright. Ryu and Savi were doing likewise. They tried waiting for it to die down, but it didn't. So eventually, Savi pulled up his vines and thrashed them about until the sand around his legs could be hauled out. Without needing a word, he helped Fen and Ryu out of their own sunken positions, then waved his paw eastwards. Fen gave as much of a nod as he could, then they restarted, very slowly, through the storm.

They stuck tightly together, both for greater protection and so none of them could get lost. It meant that when Ryu suddenly stopped, Fen noticed at once. He was staring at something on their left, though nothing was there other than the usual sand.

"I saw something move!" Ryu shouted to them above the noise. "It wasn't just the wind… was moving the other way…"

Ryu seemed quite unconvinced himself, and after a moment's pause of nothing he shook his head and took a step away. It landed on an unusually solid bump. He barely had time to be surprised before a brown-yellow ball burst from the sand into his body, throwing him to the floor. As Fen watched he felt the sand underneath him move too, and a thin figure tackled him almost vertically. Something sharp on its rear end slashed across his fur.

The 'mon slowed its supersonic wings to land opposite him. *A Vibrava.* Fen shook himself and spat sand away, expecting it to go underground again. Instead, the Vibrava opened its mouth and fired

a stream of dragon-fire. He guessed it was so for two reasons; its dark-blue colour, and how it burnt his fur in a way that no regular flame was able to.

Despite the pain he managed to breathe a flamethrower of his own; the two heat streams collided, throwing up shades of green and violet into the air. The Vibrava cut off its attack first and darted away.

Fen looked around for a moment. Savi's vines were suspended and he was checking the sand around him intently, where at least one ripple was moving. Ryu was tussling with a Trapinch, whose enormous head was hurling sand into the air for protection.

All these Pokémon are adapted to the conditions… we're at a serious disadvantage.

A high-pitched screech caught his attention; in fact, it immediately made his head pound. But it enabled him to avoid the Vibrava's subsequent lunge, then scramble towards Ryu.

"Ryu, get to Savi!" he shouted. At that moment the Trapinch clamped itself around one of Ryu's forearms, but he had seen it coming and threw the thing back off him with a counter.

They both turned to the Ivysaur, who was trying with increasing desperation to fend off two Sandslash. The 'mon darted in and out of the sand relentlessly.

"Scarves?" Ryu said.

"Give me mine now," Fen replied. "We need to draw out the underground 'mon."

Ryu had practiced withdrawing the scarves, so barely needed a second to pass Fen the faded white material. Then he shoved Fen to the ground with him, avoiding the Vibrava and Trapinch's simultaneous attacks.

As soon as the evasion scarf was around Fen's neck, everything felt in control. He jumped up in front of Ryu to confront their two enemies. Seeing the Vibrava open its mouth, he moved just as another of its dragon-flamethrowers emerged. He whistled at the Trapinch to taunt it into attacking; it growled before digging itself into the sand. Not ideal, but a solution quickly came to him.

He turned to the two underground Sandslash circling Savi. Ryu was waiting for the right moment to run between them. Fen checked that the Vibrava wasn't within firing range, then moved towards the Sandslash, aware of the Trapinch still pursuing him. When that was right behind him, he stepped over the Sandslash ball, making it leap out from the sand. With his heightened agility he leapt away from the ball on his instep, and both the Sandslash and Trapinch attacked where he *had* been. His timing wasn't perfect, though; rather than colliding as he intended, both 'mon flew gracelessly in different directions. However, the distraction gave Ryu time to run to Savi, who lifted a forepaw up for the scarf to be tied around.

The downside to Fen's scarf was that a single strong attack would wipe all his agility and leave him exhausted. Because of that his role was limited to being a distractor of foes, which fit perfectly with his taunting abilities.

Savi was the key player in their strategy: the element scarf being tied to him boosted the power of non-physical attacks. That encompassed almost every attack Savi knew. While Fen could coordinate where their enemies went, Savi had to deal most of the damage. The element scarf slowed the wearer to the point where they were almost immobile, but as long as Fen kept enemies within range of Savi's vines, he wouldn't need to move.

"Take care of anything behind me," Savi said to Ryu as the scarf was tied. "I can't move fast enough-"

As Ryu finished tying, Savi made a little gasp of surprise. His vines, which had been darting around the sand trying to intercept attacks, suddenly plunged into the ground. Ryu saw them extend like the

veins underneath the sand. The Vibrava was breathing another attack at Fen, but as it did a pair of vines burst from the sand and coiled around it. The creature writhed and squealed in their grip, and Fen lashed out with a foot, putting the 'mon in a tangled heap on the floor. The Trapinch and one Sandslash were still on the move and, Ryu realised, the sandstorm made projectiles like Savi's leaves or seeds difficult to use. Not only would the wind misdirect them, but Savi couldn't risk striking Fen by mistake.

"Fen!" Ryu shouted. "Bring them nearer!"

Fen glanced up and his eyes told Ryu he'd understood. Ryu, noting that the second Sandslash had gone missing, turned behind him. Just in time; it was hurtling underground straight into Savi's path.

Savi's concentration was crucial, so Ryu, seeing no other option, ran over and threw his body on top of the sand ripple. His paws found something sharp, but his hold was weak and the Sandslash was able to push out of the sand. While Ryu was knocked back on the floor, it drove both its claws into his back.

Ryu cried out. He lurched forwards far enough to grab one of the Sandslash's feet, then yanked it to the side with all his energy. The Sandslash howled and stumbled onto its side.

Hearing Ryu, Savi withdrew the vines that had been striking Fen's targets. Even with their insatiable lust for fighting, Savi thought, the wilds were clearly tiring. A couple of vine whips made Ryu's foe retreat, and another vine helped the Riolu up.

"We're in a good position," Ryu said, pulling out the last, faded-red scarf.

Savi cursed as the Sandslash burrowed before he could strike again. "Take care of the ones Fen's got," he said. "I'll watch this. Can come back here if you need to."

"Yeah," Ryu said. His paws shook in tying the scarf; partly due to fatigue, but partly because he had little idea of what was about to happen.

The physical scarf was perhaps the most powerful of all. It increased the speed and hitting power of the wearer to frightening extremes, but it came at an inevitable cost. Savi saw the effect in his periphery as soon as the scarf was secured; Ryu's pupils dilated almost completely, and he sprinted towards the 'mon around Fen, howling wildly.

Fen faltered slightly at the sight of Ryu tearing straight towards him, but he managed to manoeuvre the Trapinch between him and the Riolu. Unfortunately, the power of Ryu's fist hurled the Ground 'mon straight into him. Even with his agility, Fen couldn't get up fast enough and an unhurt Sandslash swiped across his chest, before doing the same to knock out the Trapinch.

Fen gasped for breath, straining all his energy to reach the scarf around his neck. It was useless now. The Sandslash's savagery had blinded it to Ryu's presence, and the Riolu wasted no time in finishing it off.

Fen finally undid the scarf and felt the world return to normal. Only the Vibrava was left now, Ryu facing it down. But as he prepared to punch, the Vibrava burrowed underground in a flash. Ryu's fist met thin air, and he glanced around in bemusement. Fen knew already what would happen; the Vibrava flew up from beneath Ryu's feet, wiping him out.

With Ryu's limited cognition, the Vibrava would be too clever for him. Fen whistled to gather its attention. Both Ryu and the Vibrava turned; Fen hoped that the former still recognised him. The Vibrava skimmed low across the ground, blowing a tornado of sand into his path. It blinded him.

He tried stepping backwards, but something solid pushed him back. He looked around, though it burned his eyes to do so; a sand vortex

surrounded him, its winds too strong to even let him move.

He managed to locate the Vibrava ahead. Its wings had slowed, but they were quickly whirring back to speed. It breathed more dragon-fire, but Fen managed to keep it at bay with his own. Then the flames disappeared and the Vibrava flew towards him. Fen's arms could barely move; he couldn't beat it away, which made it lucky, in a way, that the Vibrava decided to bite him.

Its teeth sunk into his shoulder, which he felt immediately. "RYU!" Fen cried.

He couldn't throw it off, so with the little strength he could muster, he grabbed onto the creature's body with both arms, holding it in place. His eyes watered with pain now, vision flickering. *Please, please hear me Ryu!*

Suddenly, there was a rush of air to his side, a crunch of bones, and the pain receded. Fen collapsed to his knees in relief.

Having just crushed most of the Vibrava's exoskeleton, Ryu looked eagerly for something else to attack. What he didn't expect was a vine to shoot out of the sandstorm and pull at the knot on his neck.

He growled and fended the vine away, but another one quickly arrived, and together they pulled enough to undo the knot and send the scarf to the floor.

Ryu stood very still. It took a second to remember how it felt to think.

"I… oh, fuck," he muttered. He retrieved the scarf. He had paid attention to Faoz's warnings about what the scarf did, but he still hadn't expected something *that* extreme.

"Could one of you give me a hand?" Savi called out. Ryu could just make out his green figure through the dust. Next to Ryu, Fen picked himself up, plucking out a small tooth lodged in his shoulder. The Vibrava thankfully hadn't bitten too deeply.

The other Sandslash was unconscious, a few metres from Savi. Ryu undid Savi's scarf, restored all three of them into his bag, and then they gave a collective sigh of relief.

Savi spoke first. "That went pretty well, given the circumstances?"

"Well enough," Fen said. "Certainly better than if we hadn't had a strategy. Or the scarves."

"Yeah…" Savi shook his head. "Those scarves are powerful, alright. It took me a little getting used to. How did you find them?"

"I'd worn that one before, so it wasn't so much of a shock."

Ryu groaned. "Looking back, I hate it. Feels like someone else did all those punches." He shrugged. "Can't complain about the result though, even if Fen suffered a bit."

"Yeah, sorry about that," Savi said. "I think I left you both too much to do…"

Ryu chuckled a little, and Savi turned to him. "What?"

"Well, you come across like the timidest 'mon ever, Savi, but whenever we get into a fight you turn into this crazy, vine-wielding thing. I'm not saying it's bad!" he added at Savi's confused look. "But you shouldn't apologise for anything. You were unreal. Especially given how bad the conditions are. From now on I think me and Fen should just stand guard while you take care of all the wilds. Seriously, what makes you fight like that?"

Savi smiled, though he looked at the floor. "Probably something innate," he murmured. "Maybe my parents had something. I don't know."

Ryu's eyelids raised. "Did you ever ask them?"

"No… I can't really ask them."

"Well, obviously not while we're *here*, but-"

"No, I mean-" Savi sighed, "I don't *know* my parents. At all. Was abandoned at birth."

Silence. Ryu blinked at him. "Mew, really? How'd you… survive that?"

"Well, I was lucky. A Shinx happened to be wandering around nearby, and I got adopted from there," Savi said. He smiled at their looks of shock and sympathy. "Hey, don't worry about it. I don't even remember those days, I was tiny. Just saying that that might explain… the fighting thing, y'know?"

"Yeah… okay." Ryu patted Savi's bud slowly. "Well, we're glad you could make it."

Savi chuckled. Fen asked him, "Is that sort of thing… common in Kyunn? That a Pokémon gets adopted like you?" He remembered a Fire at Arkan wondering if he was the same, after he'd been vague about his own family.

Savi shrugged. "Not sure. I'm sure it happens occasionally."

"And that Shinx that found you, was that…"

"Yeah, of course." Savi's eyes glinted at that.

Even when they set off again, Fen struggled to get the image of Savi as a tiny, starved Bulbasaur out of his mind. But he'd never respected the 'mon so much.

As night arrived the desert became as cold as anywhere Fen could remember. A sand dune was the only form of shelter available, along with the umbrella, and he suffered a fitful sleep. The sun and sandstorms the next day were similarly unrelenting. It was a huge relief that the few wilds they encountered were alone, and they didn't require the scarves again.

In the late afternoon, there was respite. First they met trees, then thin wisps of grass, and finally, to the relief of their dry mouths and empty flask, a river.

Unfortunately, solving that problem only seemed to emphasise their other: food. Until the desert they'd relied upon rationing out the nuts and berries still left in Ryu's bag. But once this was used up, and it was clear that their chances of finding any food in the sandstorms was virtually impossible, they had little choice but to go hungry.

Those hours without food soon stretched into days. The effects were as bad as Fen had feared. They met a Mightyena the day after leaving the desert, whose every snap of its jaws seemed intent on hurting. Fighting it off should have been simple, but the hunger was sapping Fen's instincts too; he felt a second slower in every regard, and even breathing fire was more difficult than it had been for a long while. They were desperately careful to avoid fights from thereon.

He could tell Ryu was struggling just as much as him, though the Riolu refused to say anything negative. He walked on the soles of his feet as opposed to the tips, while his tail was permanently between his legs in the colder hours.

Savi had done most of the work fighting the Mightyena. He was the least hungry of them all, explaining that exposure to sunlight helped replenish his energy in a way similar to food. However, the Ivysaur's body was not as used to such relentless travel. He nursed his sore legs whenever they took a break.

And, being out of the desert, the weather fluctuated as wildly as ever between hot and cold, calm and chaos.

The morning after a particularly harsh night, Ryu spoke up.

"We need to find food today. If not… we're getting to the point where we'll hardly be able to walk. Certainly not fight."

Fen shook some frost off his fur. "You're saying we should try hunting?"

It was to his regret that none of them had mentioned the problem to Faoz. When Zephia had been with them, they'd relied on her to hunt. But now that she was gone, they were stuck. Savi's species were primarily herbivores, Fen couldn't even stomach the act of hunting, much as he resented himself for it, and Ryu confessed that while his parents would have taught him eventually, they hadn't before he'd run away.

"If every tree and shrub around continues being dead, we don't have much choice," Ryu said.

Fen reluctantly agreed. The weaker they were, the more difficult it would become to hunt, too. "If we still haven't eaten by this evening, we'll try," he said.

But just a short time afterwards, continuing through the thick forestry the compass directed them to, their prayers seemed answered. They arrived at a huge, square clearing of trees at the peak of a hill. Inside was a sight which gave Fen a mix of apprehension and excitement.

There were collapsed houses and similar debris that had been all over Fallarbor Town. But in the centre of the clearing, though the forms were only specks, there were clearly humans. Probably two dozen of them, sitting on a circle of logs around a wood fire. A couple were holding silver objects that sparkled in the light. They had to be knives. And some sort of meat was being turned over the fire. Even from their distance it sent Fen's stomach into knots of longing.

The trio got low to the floor, so just their eyes peeked over the hill.

"This must be the town Takao mentioned," Fen whispered. "Fortree. We're on the right path."

Ryu nodded. "You see they have food?"

"I noticed, yes."

A nervous moment passed. All three pairs of eyes were fixed on the scene ahead.

Then Ryu added, "Are we gonna steal it, or what?"

Mismatch

Savi hummed, unconvinced. "Stealing it might be difficult… there's a lot of humans there. Looks like they have more of their knives, too."

"But if that's *all* they have…" Ryu mused. "We can't just charge straight in, but if we found a way to separate them to just a few… we should be faster than them, at least. That's what Zephia told us once."

"Those humans in the first town were terrified whenever we moved," Savi added. "So it would make sense."

"Right! Exactly. All we need to do is come up with a decent strategy. You could put a load of them to sleep on your own, right Savi?"

"Some of them, at least… I doubt the powder would reach them all."

"That's cool." Ryu waved a dismissive paw. "Either me or Fen could distract the rest of them, I s'pose, so the other can grab the food…? Fen, you're the expert, what do you…"

Ryu stopped as Fen turned to him, astonished. "Why - why do we have to steal it?" he demanded.

Ryu blinked at him. "Because we're dying of starvation?"

"But they're almost certainly starving, too!"

Ryu glanced doubtfully between him and the human group. "Maybe. But we don't know for sure…"

"Okay, even if they're not starving, just *look* at them. Their town's destroyed, they're sitting on logs… they're in a pretty desperate state, aren't they? And they're still *people* ! It's no different than if they were a group of lost, surviving 'mon."

"But Ryu's right," Savi said. "We need food, somehow. If we're just going to pass this place by…"

"I'm not advocating *that*," Fen said quickly. "I think we should talk to the humans. Like at Fallarbor. We don't have to steal; if we tell them why we're here, convince them that we need help… they won't be able to come with us, that would be too dangerous, but they could share some of their food."

And I might learn something vital from them, he thought.

Ryu considered for a while, but then shook his head. "That would make things more dangerous."

" *More* dangerous? How?"

"Because we'll be standing right next to the humans, basically at their mercy. Instead of if we, like, split ourselves up to bypass them easier."

Fen scowled, unable to think of an immediate answer. Like Ryu, his stomach was crying out for something to eat, but to do it like this, tempting though it was… no! He couldn't bear the thought that they would starve these people by stealing from them. He wouldn't do it.

"I'm talking to them," he said firmly. "I know I can make it work. They won't expect a Pokémon to walk up to them and write a message on paper, in their language. If we show them…"

He started thinking out loud. "Show them that we're intelligent. Not feral. Use the umbrella. Walk like civilised 'mon would, more upright, not hunched like we're about to attack…"

Ryu looked at him again, considering, but the moment he opened his mouth there came a thudding of footsteps ahead. Their heads turned at once.

Nothing had changed, except the humans had also stopped and were staring to their right. Fen's position meant he couldn't follow their line of sight, but it became clear moments later what was there.

They weren't footsteps, but hooves. Five brown-furred creatures were suddenly charging towards the human group. The biggest of them was as tall as a human and two or three times as broad. Only one Pokémon was noticeably smaller than the rest.

They slowed to a halt at about 10 metres away, and all roared at once. More than half of the human group fled right then, running behind buildings blocking Fen's view. None of the Pokémon followed, though.

The most advanced of their herd flicked its head downwards at the fire with the bundle of meat over it, and Fen realised that, feral as they were, these 'mon had the very same intention they did. Some of the remaining humans realised their intent; someone hastily tipped a bucket of water over the fire, and others got into a rough semi-circle around the food. All of them carried knives. They weren't giving it up without a fight.

"Tauros," Savi gasped. "Oh… oh Mew. They're crazy enough when civilised…"

Fen was just as worried. What could *he* do about this? For starters, they were a long way from the impending battle. And if they ran into it… could they fight off the Tauros? He doubted it, even with their scarves. Could they do it with the humans' assistance? It was still extremely risky, and the humans might believe them to be feral and attack before they could help.

He didn't have time to decide, as the lead Tauros suddenly charged forwards.

Remarkably, a lone human ran straight back at it and swung a long knife at its face. The Tauros narrowly swerved away, then cycled

back on itself. It roared again, and this time the rest of its herd followed it into battle.

There appeared to be no contest. The first human was charged at by two Tauros, both kicking him into the ground. Another was sent flying by a snap of a Tauros' horns. A few still stood bravely, defending the food, but Fen was silently pleading that they give it up to spare themselves.

Then something extraordinary happened. One of the furthest humans broke away from the group and hurled a knife forwards. It looped up unsteadily, yet when it came down it met the smallest Tauros right in its eye. The 'mon's legs instantly bucked, and gave a wounded cry that Fen felt even from their hiding place.

The other Tauros were stunned by this stroke of misfortune, and the humans took advantage. Three of them attacked the injured Tauros as it writhed and kicked, blind, on the ground. By the time two of its herd roared back to life and kicked at the humans, the wounded 'mon had stopped moving.

The humans backed away from them, and there was another stand-off. The Tauros crowded around their fallen ally, while 10 or so humans stood firmly a few metres away. The herd pawed and kicked at the ground, suddenly hesitant. A couple made high-pitched whines.

As feral as they are, Fen thought, *they're not emotionless. Not stupid, either.*

And what the herd did next proved it.

Three Tauros moved in front of their herd's leader, then they charged forwards in a horizontal line. Knives were desperately thrown and swung by the humans but if they connected, they made no difference. The three front-Tauros brute-forced a path to the food, but instead of picking it up only kicked at the humans defending it. When the final Tauros came up behind them, there were no humans left to

fight. It carefully picked up the meat in its mouth, and the herd wheeled back around. They bowed their heads at the dead Tauros before running back into the trees, disappearing as swiftly as they had arrived.

All was silent. Fen heard his heavy breaths, Ryu and Savi's too, despite them not moving an inch.

"That was intense," Ryu remarked.

"Yeah," Fen murmured. He shook his head. "I'm glad the Tauros only wanted the food. I thought all those humans would be slaughtered."

"Me too," Ryu said. "They're pretty weak now, though. Weaker than before."

That was certainly true. Seemingly all the humans had been kicked or bulldozed at least once, and that was from those who had even stayed to fight. Those that had run from the Tauros were yet to return. The only two humans they could see currently moving were examining the dead corpse.

Yet Fen frowned at Ryu's words. He gave the Riolu a suspicious look.

"What?" Ryu said at once.

"Why do you say they're weak, like it's a good thing?"

Ryu frowned; a sort of reluctant, sad frown. "You're not gonna like what I'm suggesting," he said. "But I think that Tauros just became our food."

The thought had never crossed Fen's mind, but of course it made sense. The Tauros would have more than enough meat on it for them, possibly even more than what its herd had just stolen. Even so…

"Think about it," Ryu added, "I *know* the humans have knives, and they just killed a Tauros. But that was one lucky throw, right?"

Fen was unable to disagree.

"It's less dangerous now, since all of them are injured. And we could definitely carry that Tauros, even if it's between us."

"But it's the same problem as before," Fen argued. "We're stealing food from them."

Ryu huffed, frustrated. "Is it really stealing? They just happened to kill it…"

"Whatever it *counts* as, I'd bet they would eat the Tauros if we didn't take it!"

"Guys," Savi interjected, "whatever we do, decide on it soon? Because waiting the first time around almost backfired…"

Fen glared at Ryu, who glared back. Rarely could Fen remember so much tension between them. He suspected the hunger was playing a major role; it took a major effort to keep himself composed.

"Let's *try* my way first," he said. "Talking to the humans. If it doesn't work… I'll guess we have to take the food. But we'll do that how *I* say. Alright?"

For a moment Ryu looked like he wanted to argue back, but he too seemed to suppress the urge. "Alright," he said, satisfied. "You talk to them. You have a plan for us too, I assume?"

"Yeah."

As he briefed them though, Fen couldn't help feeling worried. He was uncertain that this would work under any amount of planning.

Nevertheless, they shortly emerged from the clearing as one. Ryu carried the umbrella over them despite it only spitting with rain, while

Fen's tail flame was at its smallest. Savi wore the evasion scarf, for two reasons: like the umbrella, it marked them as more intelligent, civilised. Plus, it was the only scarf they could wear somewhat in advance, and they agreed that Savi's range made him their most useful attacker, if attack was what they needed, in such a 'utility' situation.

Fen also held a piece of paper and pencil in his hand, ready. Nothing was written yet; he would wait until the humans were close enough to do that. They might still doubt a Pokémon carrying a human message, but they couldn't if they *saw* him write it. That was his theory.

The town seemed to be grid-like in design, with rows of trees splitting roads and houses. Now that most of the trees had collapsed, virtually no houses had survived either, but they still proceeded past the piles of rubble with caution. Fen recognised the shade of red on one building closest to their side of the clearing; this Pokémon Centre hadn't survived as miraculously as Fallarbor's.

They were still a long way away when one of the active humans pointed at them. More heads quickly turned. Fen hesitated momentarily, but then gestured silently for the other two to continue.

"Don't talk under any circumstances," he'd told them. He had to assume the people would interpret any growl or bark as one of aggression.

But in the end, none of that mattered, as his worst fears were confirmed.

Though he'd been too far away to clearly see the human faces, it was clear they'd been communicating. At about 20 metres away, a group of them all jumped to their feet at once, most carrying knives. They sprinted towards him, making disturbingly Pokémon-like battle cries.

"Fen?!" Savi yelped. "What…"

Before Fen could think what to do, Ryu had decided. In a flash, he dropped the umbrella and bolted into the nearest human's legs. As they toppled over, another swiped at him with a knife. But Ryu was so small he could duck under it easily, and the man screamed as Ryu cracked a punch into his thigh.

As Fen turned to Savi, the Ivysaur was already equally busy; he cracked one human with his vines, then took a giant leap forwards to tackle another to the ground.

The attacked humans, having already taken a pummelling from the Tauros, had no chance of fighting back. Savi seemed possessed, the scarf letting him slash and tear through their challenges with ease and ruthlessness. Fen knew that the little chance they had of communicating with the humans was already over.

Still yet to move, he looked for Ryu again, but an instinct made him duck a second later. He heard a dull *thud* of an object hitting the ground. Then a human was suddenly running full pelt at him, arms flailing. His thoughts were scrambled between *don't fight!* and *defend yourself!* and in the end he did something in between; grabbing hold of the man as he swung a fist wildly, being easily faster than him, then tossing him over his shoulder.

Immediately he glanced backwards, but the man had only fallen heavily; nothing looked broken. *Thank Arceus…*

In front of him, there were no humans left standing. Most were conscious, but they gazed at Ryu and Savi with both loathing and resignation. They knew it was over. Ryu and Savi stood among the wreckage, and the looks of satisfaction they wore made Fen lose his cool.

He screamed, "WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? LET'S GO!"

He ran to the Tauros, ordering Ryu to do the same, and picked it up between them. Then they ran east.

The clearing, or Fortree as it had been, seemed to stretch forever, a never-ending mess of rubble. He and Ryu started tiring in their hunger, but Fen refused to slow until they were back under trees and forestry. He needed the clearing out of his mind.

At last they reached the end of it, quickly settling down in a sheltered spot. Fen was both surprised and extremely relieved when Ryu said that he knew how to fillet the Tauros - 'I watched Zephia a few times' was all he said in explanation. Just carrying the dead 'mon had made Fen queasy in a way that only this sort of thing seemed able to do. They left Ryu with it while he and Savi built a small fire, so he had a means of cooking the thing.

But when the meat was finally prepared, and he'd roasted his share of it, he might've mistaken it for oran berries for how glorious its effects were. He could feel energy flowing back to him as he ate, and his stomach burned again with the warmth he hadn't realised how dearly he'd missed. For a moment, all his troubles were forgotten.

Ryu devoured the meat with similar joy. Savi, not carnivorous like them, merely rested at first. When Ryu offered him some, he looked uncomfortable, but clearly hungry, he still ate a little. Ryu shared the rest between him and Fen. Though they felt stuffed by the end, carrying the meat around in the bag wasn't an option given the events in Fortree.

"Well, that ended better than I could've hoped when we arrived," Ryu said cheerfully. "Hopefully we won't reach that kind of hunger point again, huh?"

Suddenly reminded of their actions, Fen sighed deeply. The concern over stealing wasn't even his biggest concern anymore. The way that Ryu and Savi had tossed the people aside so easily, without any restraint, bothered him greatly. It was strange: as soon as their attacks were used against *people*, not Pokémon, it all seemed just… horribly wrong.

"Ryu," he said hesitantly, "if we come across humans in the future… could you try not to attack them so violently?"

Ryu blinked at him. "You're asking me… not to fight?"

"Well, no, but in those situations - okay, yes. Look, we got the Tauros in the end, but I'm sure we didn't have to take out so many humans in doing so. We could've run up and grabbed it as soon as there was a gap, and-"

Ryu looked at Fen as if he was speaking a different language. "They had knives! And they attacked us first! What am I supposed to do? Why would I leave things up to chance, especially when it's important as this?"

"Well, you don't have to go in so strong-"

"And how is what I did even violent?" Ryu demanded. "You've seen me fight a million times and never found that wrong!"

"But that's with *Pokémon* !" Fen exclaimed. "I told you before that humans aren't like 'mon. They don't fight each other all the time - their bodies aren't designed for it! Pokémon fight, humans don't. Pit a fully-grown human and any evolved 'mon against each other, and it'll be a mismatch. I just… I think it's unfair to fight them because of that. It's not right!"

There was a pause. "Even so, Fen," Savi said, "fighting's instinctual sometimes. When some 'mon's running at you - okay, it's not a 'mon, but they're still *running* - you want to fight back. That's how it is."

Ryu nodded vigorously to that, but added nothing more. Fen rubbed his face.

"What happened just makes me really uncomfortable," he said, feeling feeble. "I can't be angry with either of you, because we got what we needed to, and that was the most important thing. Now the

only town we've got left is Lilycove. Let's hope we don't run into any more groups of humans before then."

Ryu nodded again. "Your first plan was great though, Fen. I really wanted it to work out."

Fen shrugged. "It's passed now."

"Also…" Ryu shifted his feet uncomfortably. "I dropped the magic stick when I started fighting. Forgot to go back for it. Sorry about that."

Ah, the magic stick… Fen smiled a little.

"That's okay. I'm sure we can find shelter without the umbrella. And I doubt we'll need to walk through any more deserts and sandstorms."

He paused; was that genuine knowledge coming through to him, or just blind hope? *Not like it matters. We'll walk through whatever it takes.*

"At least you can stop reminding me what it's called," Ryu added cheerfully.

While there were indeed no deserts, the general terrain got noticeably worse over the following days. It had never been truly stable, but now there were puddles of water appearing up to their necks. When there wasn't a clear path through these, a combination of Ryu, Savi and usually broken tree trunks were needed to help Fen across. Though Fen was sure his resistance to water had grown, especially since evolving, he didn't dare chance it. He was still haunted by the memory of Zephia shoving him into a river.

Giant holes in the ground started appearing too, stretching deep into the earth's dark void. Savi's legs were so tired that he started using the evasion scarf for these areas of extra agility. But they learned very quickly that prolonged wearing of the scarf caused dizziness,

which lasted several hours. Savi was given the night off watch that day, and the scarf was retired back for emergencies only.

On the third afternoon since Fortree, their dance across the terrain led them to a high pier meeting a lake. On a rare flat surface, they sat down to rest.

Fen inspected the side of the pier; there were some shapes of metal that when turned upright became a little hut, large enough to give them shelter. He guessed they had been stalls of some kind, for the pier seemed a good sightseeing spot. The stalls were too big to carry, but he and Ryu broke off a piece to carry over their heads. It would do, especially since the previous night had been very wet and painful.

He gazed curiously at a structure facing the pier. It was like a tall, jagged mountain, except it stood entirely on its own in the middle of the lake; there was an identical pier to theirs in the very distance. The island-mountain wasn't completely natural, though. There were windows and doorways hidden among the black rock, and it was flat at the very top, forming a sort of altar. A thin mist covered this.

If only I remembered what this mountain's about, Fen thought wistfully. *Looks mysterious. It must've held some importance.*

His eyes were suddenly drawn to movement in the water. It was odd; the ripples were minute, but they had no clear point of origin, and spread across the whole lake at almost the instant they appeared. He nudged Ryu, pointing this out, and Ryu too looked confused.

Then came a roar from underground, or no, Fen realised, *two* roars at once; one like the gurgles and shrieks of every sea creature in the world, and the other of such depth and power that the solid ground they stood on suddenly felt weak. He, Ryu and Savi shared glances, but no one moved. They felt petrified.

The mountain lake suddenly span like a whirlpool. It caught the mountain itself, which was no match, its foundations tumbling into

the water like building blocks. The spinning centre of the lake rose upwards, becoming 10 metres tall and twice as wide. Blinding yellow light shone inside the structure's peak, and though the water hid its glowing form, Fen knew what was inside.

The lake was still whirring to Kyogre's commands when to the opposite side of them, cracks began forming in the road and dirt. They spread and deepened in a matter of moments, then the most central fissure burst upwards and another flash of yellow appeared. A platform of earth as mighty as Kyogre's water was created. On it, Groudon stomped its feet, each causing tremors that made Fen cry out in pain.

Groudon roared again at Kyogre; the water parted around the sea Pokémon as it did the same. Then they stopped. For a moment, the world was still. It occurred to Fen that they stood in the very centre between these two gods, at their mercy. But all he could do was watch.

Though the water around Kyogre seemed to recede, its form inflated and its yellow light became even more intense. Groudon slammed its arms into the earth, which glowed red and then suddenly burst open with lava. The lava morphed with its body and its size grew like Kyogre's did, as well as its yellow glow.

They attacked simultaneously. Water and lava spouted from their bodies, the two beams of blue and red colliding in the air above Fen. Great chunks of element broke off in the collision and scattered in all directions. Fen ducked behind the metal shelter, like Ryu and Savi, but it lasted seconds; a metre-long globule of lava cut through it like a knife through butter.

At that, some survival instinct forced the three of them to ignore their fear and run, but there was nowhere safe. A combination of Fen and Savi yanked Ryu back before a huge power line could fall on him. Then Fen tripped on a crack in the ground and tumbled into a stray puddle, submerging him. Once Ryu scrambled in and yanked him

out, the Riolu looked in vain for help. But they were hopeless. It felt like their bodies were being crushed under the gods' mere presence.

But then Kyogre suddenly cut off its water and ducked from its aquatic perch, sending Groudon's lava high above it. As Groudon hesitated, a new sound came from the sea Pokémon. From its mouth it fired continuous, glistening sheets of ice, which threw a freezing mist around the trio below. Much of the ice connected with Groudon, only evaporating on its scales. But the ice also spun left and right, encasing everything it met in giant glaciers. This time Fen was fortunate to be in the middle of the gods, for Kyogre didn't aim its stream downwards.

Then Groudon responded, white flames pouring from its jaws. Those hitting Kyogre or its lake sizzled and smoked furiously. Stray white jets hit trees which were instantly incinerated, and the lake-mountain, already severely damaged by Kyogre, was completely destroyed.

The two gods paused again. This time Groudon took two great steps on the earth before launching itself forwards. Kyogre flew down to meet it, riding a giant wave across land. With another joint cry the gods physically collided.

The tremor it caused almost wiped out Fen, but some desperate resolve kept him conscious. Groudon and Kyogre wrestled now, fins and claws lashing at each other - like any fight, only on a godly scale. However, they tired as the grappling went on. They reached the lake and Groudon suddenly fell straight through it. Still in its grip, Kyogre was dragged down too.

Their cries got quieter and quieter, until there was finally silence. The only noise was the three tiny Pokémon gasping. Slowly, Fen felt that awful pressure on him start to lift.

Ryu said, "When we saw them, flying on Shaice… it wasn't that bad, right?"

Fen couldn't think of anything to reply with, and it seemed Savi couldn't either. Fen got up, managing not to cry out with the strain it caused so many muscles. Ryu's question seemed rather trivial when he looked around.

Fissures had split the land around them like jigsaw pieces. Some areas were flooded; some were coated in lava; many were a collision of the two. Ice and lava alike filled the new holes in the ground at random. It made him think of one of those outlined drawings in children's colouring books, only this had been filled in with the wrong colours, and the child had ignored all the outline's contours and shapes. And they'd miraculously landed on one of the only bits of land that had been coloured in correctly.

Fen tore his eyes away. "Don't bother worrying about that," he said to Ryu. "This is Groudon and Kyogre we're talking about. Things have been bad from the moment they woke. We've just got to keep moving. Need to be walking on more stable land before another storm or something arrives."

He turned and forced his legs to move again. But he quickly noticed, for he'd unknowingly become so used to the sound of their footsteps, that neither Ryu nor Savi followed.

"Guys?" he asked. They both still lay flat on the ground. "Are you injured?"

He saw Ryu and Savi exchange a glance. The sadness in their faces was alarming.

Then Savi looked up at Fen, and it took a few seconds for him to finally speak.

"Fen, have you ever thought that we might be… well, hopelessly outmatched here?"

He turned back to where Groudon and Kyogre had stood in front of them. "I mean, when *that* happens… what do we do? What *can* we

do? We've been on our own here for so long, and no one seems able to help us, and my legs hurt *so much,* and, and… oh, I don't know…"

"Savi, look." Fen paused, thinking how best to phrase this. "I know that this seems like a complete mismatch. Thinking about that won't help at all. Because though I don't know *how* yet, I'm certain that stopping this is within our power. I really do! I wouldn't have come here if I didn't believe so."

Savi still looked reluctant. He seemed almost shameful about something. Fen had a sudden thought.

"Say, do your legs hurt that badly?" he asked.

Savi blinked. "Well… yes, I can barely walk. It's agony. I said before that my body's not built for this sort of thing…"

"I can carry you on my shoulders for a bit. Can your forepaws grip well?"

"Wh-!" Savi looked startled at the suggestion. "You shouldn't! I mean, you've worked as hard as I have, and I'm heavier than you think-"

Fen smiled. "I know you're modest, but you need help. Besides, what we *cannot do* is stay where we are. Not only is it dangerous, in case the land floods or collapses, but just *sitting* here staring at this mess is gonna destroy us. I hate it as much as you. Ryu, you're not injured, are you?"

As he turned, Ryu got to his feet too. He shook his limbs, as if they needed recharging. "No, 'course not," he muttered. "And hey… I can give you a hand with Savi if it's too much. Can swap over the bag, y'know."

"I'm not sure I'd even fit on your shoulders, Ryu," Savi pointed out.

"Oh, true. Alright, well… my arms?" Ryu practically giggled then at the absurdity of the thought. Then Savi started laughing too.

"Look… what Fen said is right," Savi said, smiling a little. "Let's just get out of here first. I only need a little rest. Nothing's broken."

Fen pulled his tail in front of him so Savi wouldn't get burned as he grabbed on. The Ivysaur's legs were just long enough to get a good hold on his shoulders, but he wrapped both his vines underneath Fen's arms anyway, like a harness. The weight was substantial, but in a strange way that only made Fen relish the challenge more.

His words to Savi had been no lie. Their days of walking had given him plenty of time to reflect on matters, and the more he thought about how difficult their situation was, how strong the forces were that they were fighting against… the more convinced he was that they could stop them. That they *had* to stop them.

He had been put here for a reason, after all. Sure, there were many things he didn't understand yet, like why he'd woken up on Kyunn rather than Hoenn, or why all his memories had been wiped. But it could be no coincidence that his transformation had coincided with the start of Groudon and Kyogre's fighting. Or that he'd been directed, by the emotion attacks and visions, towards the site of it.

All the details around his life seemed impossible; but maybe that was the point, for stopping this fight appeared impossible too. He surely had something - some power, some hidden knowledge, whatever it was - that was the key, and they were so close to it now, so near Lilycove, that the only thing stopping them from reaching it was willpower. They'd already overcome so much in coming this far. That was why he couldn't accept Savi or Ryu admitting defeat.

"How're ya holding up?" Ryu asked, as they delicately plotted a route across the land.

"Alright for now," Fen said.

"I'll walk if you get too tired, anyway," Savi added. He glanced at Ryu. "I think I might've been wrong, you know. If I wrapped vines around your ears, they're big enough that you might be able to hold me up…"

Ryu frowned. "What d'you mean? My ears are small." He pointed to them.

"Huh? But I thought… the bits dangling from your head…"

"Oh… you mean my *aura sensors?* Mew…" Ryu huffed in mock anger, flicking the appendages. At least, Fen hoped it was mocking. "Why the hell does everyone think they're ears…?"

Once they passed the ruined land around them, there was nothing but endless, cracked road. They saw little reason to seek a more hidden route through trees, for the road was almost completely devoid of wilds. All they had for company were the cars that, though sporadic at first, quickly consumed every inch of road. All of them were empty, and few were in a driveable state.

Fen supposed that the cars, before being rusted or victim to falling debris, had been abandoned. He remembered the brief picture in his dream of cars speeding away from Lilycove. If everyone had attempted to flee like that, a pile-up of traffic was inevitable.

Though they did see the occasional human, attempts to make even eye contact were useless. The way the humans bolted at the mere sight of their group reminded Fen of the weaker wilds in Smouldered Pass. It was like these lone humans saw themselves as prey to them. He longed to reassure them otherwise and rued his language limitations. If anything, he just wanted to ask, *'Where has everyone gone?'*

The weather was as awful as ever. But oddly, aside from that, the following days were some of their least challenging. They had few fights to deal with. The cars were very helpful for shelter, and

through a team effort they ripped off a door to hold above Fen's head when the rain wouldn't relent. They even found food in the form of bags of potato crisps and dried fruit, which Ryu scented and dug up from a car boot.

And while the collective mood wasn't exactly joyous - their surroundings and constant exhaustion didn't leave much room for that - they were hopeful. Perhaps as hopeful as the three of them had been since landing in Hoenn.

They neared Lilycove quite suddenly. The city could hardly be called such a thing anymore, for almost every apartment block and corporate building that had filled its skyline had gone. That meant that when the trio reached a slight hill, leading into the dense streets, Fen got a good view of the sea behind it. And he knew immediately that this was it.

"This is the city," he murmured. "This is where the dream happened. We've made it."

He turned to Ryu and Savi, but neither 'mon's looks mirrored the relief on his face. Rather, they seemed confused.

"Well, okay… now what?" Ryu said. "Have you remembered something?"

For a moment Fen was confused too. Other than the recognition of this place, his memory was as broken as ever. Then he remembered what had led them here.

"The dream. We need to find it."

It had started in that big field with the metal gate those Pokémon had run out of. Yet as he looked at the huge city beckoning, he felt a wave of anxiety. Lilycove itself was miles long. How could he possibly find such a specific place?

He closed his eyes briefly, and suddenly the pictures from his dream became crystal clear. He realised there was more that he knew. Cars were moving to his left, away from the sea - for that to be true he must've been to the right of the road. He was much closer to the sea itself, and had run down a footpath towards it, which was just outside the field. *Look near the sea, for a field leading into a footpath towards it, on the right-hand side of Lilycove…*

He ran through the town now, scarcely explaining his plan to Ryu and Savi. He could almost feel this location beckoning him, pulling him close. They did have to pause for a second, when the ground was split by a fissure so deep that it reached the sea underneath. Luckily, that gap was small enough to jump across.

When Fen found himself in front of a small, detached house, something made him stop. At first he wasn't sure why, for it was as dilapidated as anywhere around; what were surely once well-kept flower beds around the driveway had long wilted. Then he saw a sturdy-looking metal gate to the left of the house.

"The gate!" he exclaimed. It was open and running through revealed what he knew was there; a huge field of now overgrown grass. He turned left, and *there* was that exact view of the sea from his dream.

Now what? He looked towards the gate again. Walking back out of it, he looked to his right, and the winding path he remembered was still intact.

"Fen!" Ryu moaned. "Could you at least explain why we're running in circles?"

Fen wheeled round to them. "I was running somewhere in my dream… it started in the field, then up this footpath, but I woke up before I could find out where that led… something important must be there."

Ryu just gave an *'if you say so'* kind of look.

Fen walked slowly through the footpath. It seemed to last an eternity now. It eventually led to a series of ledges, which gave way to thin grass, then sand…

He stopped. *Sand!* He hadn't reached sand in his dream, but he somehow knew this was right. He walked forwards a little more then something caught his eye, standing out amongst the waves of tan.

Lying in the sand was a tiny figure, barely a third of his height. Its body was a strange, elongated shape, and was entirely grey except for three points of red. Glowing faintly, they had the look of jewels. One was in the creature's head and the others were at the tips of two long, thin appendages that wound around its body. It didn't move; it showed no signs of life at all other than the glowing jewels.

Fen had never seen such a Pokémon before. Neither, judging by their baffled looks, had Ryu or Savi. Was this what they were searching for? It certainly didn't look like a normal wild.

Fen carefully kneeled over the figure. "Hello?"

No response. The Pokémon's jewels kept catching his eye though, so on an impulse he reached out with a finger - even this dwarfed the jewel in size - and touched the one in its head.

The moment he did, the jewel burst into blinding light. Fen tried to recoil but found his hand somehow wouldn't move away.

"W-what's going on?" Ryu yelped. "Fen, you're glowing!"

It was true: every inch of him was covered in a film of whiteness, which seemed to push itself into the fingertip touching the jewel. It felt like something leaving him, but whatever it was didn't sap his energy. It was like a part of him he'd never been aware of. The jewel Pokémon glowed too, but its whole body was changing; it was growing and becoming brighter, especially around its head.

The glowing stopped as suddenly as it had begun. The pressure on Fen's body lifted, and he gasped, yanking his finger away. The creature's head had pinkened slightly, and the rest of its body turned a pale blue. Then its eyes flickered and opened: a luminous, electrifying yellow. Fen instinctively backed away, and a moment later it suddenly flew upwards, high into the sky. As it spiralled around it made an extraordinary, ethereal cry. Never had Fen heard anything like it, and never did he think he would again. But its meaning was clear: a sound of pure joy, relief.

Once the cry faded, the Pokémon descended until it hovered just above the sand in front of them.

A voice rung through Fen's head; a female one, sounding strangely youthful and old at once. *"I apologise for my burst then, it must have shocked you,"* it said. *"It is simply a wonder to experience my own body again. And it's only thanks to you that I can."*

Fen had no idea how to respond. His head was spinning. What did he just do? Who was this Pokémon?

"Again, my apologies," the voice said. He was certain this tiny floating Pokémon was the source of it now. *"I imagine you have questions."*

Fen momentarily averted his gaze from the floating 'mon, which was difficult to do. Behind, either side of him, Ryu looked wary, fists raised, while Savi was low to the ground with his grass fronds covering his body. Though the Ivysaur's face didn't show it, those were tell-tale signs that he was scared. Fen still felt like his own tongue was tied. What was wrong with him?

"Hey, Savi," Ryu said, stepping over to be beside him. "It's just telepathy, 'mon. Won't hurt you."

Savi muttered something to him. Ryu nodded, then spoke to the floating 'mon. "Who are you? And could you start speaking to us normally?"

Though the Pokémon smiled, Fen sensed a great sadness from it.

"My name is Mesprit," she said. *"Unfortunately, until I have fully-"*

"Mesprit?!" Ryu blurted. For a few seconds his mouth just opened and closed, unsuccessfully. " *You're…* you're Mesprit? But, you're like… you're mythical…. and you were lying in the sand, you looked-
"

"I was not dead," Mesprit said. *"But, until the recovery just made, I was weak. And I am not yet strong enough to speak auditorily, otherwise I would. Savi,"* she glanced at him, *"I may have misjudged the strength of my signal. I will attempt to reduce it, or I can simply exclude you from the signals if you would prefer."*

Savi had jumped at hearing his own name, but quickly composed himself. "I-I'll get used to it," he said. "I'll try to…"

"Very well-"

"Hold on. Why *did* you just make a recovery?" Ryu asked, voice getting increasingly higher. He put a paw on Fen's shoulder. "What did Fen do? He did something to you, didn't he? And that must be why you know who we are?"

Mesprit paused for a moment.

Fen's mind had been racing throughout Ryu's exchange. Like Ryu, he couldn't comprehend the strange, beautiful thing that touching Mesprit had triggered. He'd never had the ability to heal Pokémon; yet he'd seen, and Mesprit had as good as told him directly, that he had not only healed her, but *revived* her. Revived a mythical Pokémon!

And there was an oddity even beyond that. Like Savi, he was vulnerable to Psychic techniques, one of which was telepathy. Savi seemed overwhelmed by Mesprit's power, and Fen felt that power too, but it wasn't intimidating at all. The energy emanating from her

words… somehow felt familiar, even *comforting* . It wasn't like any Psychic attack he'd faced. Nor the other time he'd been spoken to telepathically - then the presence in his mind was most definitely foreign. Who was it that had spoken to him then…?

"Mesprit?" he ventured in her silence.

"Yes?" she answered immediately.

Fen stopped himself before a question could be formed, putting a hand to his mouth. He yelped. He'd been about to speak telepathically to her. He'd *just spoken* telepathically to her! But how? He couldn't do that consciously! He'd wanted to before, when Rycaro had spoken to him, but-

Rycaro! That was who it was! He remembered the precise words of Ryu's father now, back at Mt. Aura. In sensing his aura, Rycaro had found it unusual. *"It bears the mark of something else; a power far greater than your own."*

That had puzzled him, but he'd concluded that the 'greater power' was most likely just whatever human part of his mind Rycaro could sense. Though it had never quite added up. Why would his human mind be so much more powerful than that of the Pokémon around him? He wasn't intellectually superior over them. He was less wise than Faoz, and less cunning than Zephia.

Then he remembered something else Rycaro had said. When he'd recounted his emotion attacks - for there had been no visions up to then - Rycaro likened it to the stories of myths. *"It makes one wonder if similar forces might be guiding your path."* The emotion attacks, the visions, they *had* guided him to this very spot. But could this Mesprit have done that? Hadn't she just been lying dead in the sand? It didn't make sense…

"Fen, please, I need you to be calm," Mesprit said.

The timing of her words, knocking his thought process, agitated him even more.

"Are you-" he made sure he spoke aloud, "Are you reading my thoughts, now?"

"No! I wouldn't dare to!" There was a sudden anxiety in Mesprit's energy, too. *"I can sense your emotions, that is all. Psychic communication requires a clear mind, otherwise the agitated party will block themselves off from receiving messages. I know it is difficult, but your emotions must be stable for us to speak."*

Confused as he was, Fen was prepared to trust the word of a mythical Pokémon. Especially after her own flash of emotion. He waited a few seconds for his emotions to calm, like she said.

"I'll try," he said.

"Thank you."

"But, Mesprit…"

"Yes?"

"Am I right that… we have a kind of link with each other? That's how you were able to give me the emotion attacks, and the visions which led here, and the belief in me to trust those things. Right?"

Mesprit bowed her head. *"A link, yes."*

Fen's heartbeat tripled upon hearing it confirmed. "Then, does that mean… you know my memories?"

"Yes," Mesprit said again, without hesitation. *"And your deductions are correct… If you wish, I can help you remember them."*

Partner

This was it. Mesprit had the answers to the questions haunting him from the moment he'd woken up a Chimchar. The questions that had influenced deciding to look for the Absol, and most definitely influenced travelling to Hoenn.

It made sense, in a funny sort of way, that only a mythical Pokémon should be able to explain. He would've been surprised if it was anything less unusual. And yet…

'If you wish, I can help you remember them,' she'd said.

If you wish…?

"O-of course I want to remember them!" Fen said. "That's… it's the one thing I've been searching for since all of this… happened." Suddenly his mouth was tripping over itself. He might've tried speaking with his thoughts again, but the agitation he felt didn't clear those either.

"I understand," Mesprit said. She seemed to know that he had more to say, so he went on.

"But, why does it sound like you're… warning me getting them?"

Mesprit bowed her head. *"I must be honest with you. Restoring all your memories, as I assume you want me to do, would be dangerous. I am not afraid that the procedure itself may fail, or harm your memories more, or anything of that nature. But receiving so many memories at once may overwhelm you, especially given some of them are of a sensitive nature. I… worry how you might respond to them."*

A small 'Okay' was all Fen could respond with.

"So, I feel there are two options I can give regarding your memories. The first is to restore every one you have."

"Which… comes with all those risks?"

"Correct. The second option is to restore about ninety-nine percent of your memories; enough for you to remember a great deal of your life, except the most sensitive parts. So, many questions you have about your life will be answered, but not all."

Fen's head was spinning again. What kind of choice was this? Remember almost all of his life, or risk going insane by remembering it all? What *was* it in his memories that was so bad? He wasn't sure he bought Mesprit's excuse about remembering too much at once… but could *Mesprit* lie to him?

"Mesprit, could I ask something?" Ryu said.

It made Fen jump, for he'd completely forgotten he and Mesprit weren't alone. He sensed a little surprise from Mesprit too as she turned to Ryu.

"Certainly. What is it?"

"How important are these memories in the one percent you don't want Fen to know? Or, what exactly *wouldn't* he know, if he took your second option?"

Mesprit frowned. *"That depends on-"*

"What about, how he became a Pokémon?" Ryu cut in. "Or why he lost his memories at all?"

Fen was in awe of Ryu's directness, but very grateful too. Mesprit looked solemnly at them. *"Those, Fen would not know unless he had all his memories."*

This made matters clearer, but didn't ease Fen's worries. *Either take a risk and know the answers to the questions I've asked the most…*

or choose to protect myself and keep them a mystery. He shook his head. It was like playing a high-stakes game where he was the commodity being gambled.

Ryu glanced at him. Fen couldn't show much more than uncertainty, but the anger on Ryu's face startled him. The Riolu spoke again before he could respond.

"I have another question," he said to Mesprit.

"Yes?"

"How much control do you have over Fen's memories? Seems like quite a lot, if you can choose how much of them to restore? I mean, no one could work out how he'd suffered such severe amnesia, and he only ever remembered things that weren't personal. Isn't that strange, *unnatural*, like something only-"

"Ryu!" Fen exclaimed, stopping him. How could he accuse Mesprit so aggressively? For one, they had no idea what she was capable of; they had to be careful. And also… he couldn't believe what Ryu was saying. Mesprit said she was here to help them. She had to be!

"I understand your suspicions," Mesprit began, *"but-"*

"No!" Ryu cried. "How can you just - give and take away memories like this?! What the hell do you want with him?"

"Listen to me!"

Mesprit's mental voice seemed to acquire a megaphone, her jewels glowing as she spoke. Ryu was silenced, and she gave Savi a quick nod of apology after he yelped.

"It impresses me that you are not quick to trust, Ryu. I promise you that I had no part in erasing Fen's memories, but I cannot prove anything without revealing some of those memories. Nevertheless, there is something else which may persuade you that I'm on your

side. Like you, I am desperate to stop Groudon and Kyogre. And I know how you can find Rayquaza."

That made them pause. Fen had almost forgotten what their main goal was.

"You… Rayquaza… is out there?" Ryu said weakly.

"Of course."

"Why… why haven't you talked to Rayquaza already, if you know where he is?" Fen asked.

"That… is linked with events many eons ago."

"Explain then, so we know what you mean," Ryu said.

Fen gave him another worried glance, but Mesprit didn't flinch. With a little flick of her head, she began.

"Originally, Groudon and Kyogre existed to shape the continents and oceans of Earth. Both desired as much of their element as possible, and so Rayquaza acted as a mediator between them, making sure the world was balanced. But once that was finished, Rayquaza set Groudon and Kyogre to rest deep within the earth, while he rose into the skies.

"Some time later, an immense meteorite struck Earth. The cracks and tremors it sent through the land and seas were so strong that Groudon and Kyogre's slumbering forms were reawakened. But this time Rayquaza was not there control them.

"For a while they fought, just as they are doing now, bringing devastation upon nature. Everyone was terrified; me, Uxie, Azelf and many other powerful beings were no match for their power. We were forced to collectively call for Rayquaza to calm Groudon and Kyogre again.

"And once again, Rayquaza was able to do so. But… the ages of peace gone by seemed to make him selfish. He was furious with being woken. He demanded that, in return for his great service, those of us that called to him helped build a fortress in the sky, from where he would be impossible to disturb. Every one of us that helped construct the fortress is prevented from entering."

"Hang on, you *allowed* this to happen?" Ryu said disbelievingly. "You let Rayquaza seal himself away to a place you can never reach?!"

Mesprit's eyes flashed. *"It's not easy for you to understand. I have been alive eons; your lifetimes pass in a blink of my eyes. But despite this, I am* not *immortal. The only things that could kill me are the actions of other beings equal or greater to my power. Rayquaza is one of the latter. If your life was threatened so, I am sure you would protect it just as fervently."*

"But weren't you worried that Groudon and Kyogre might come back?" Ryu challenged.

"No; Rayquaza assured us they would not awaken for a third time. Yet clearly they have. By the actions of humans, it seems. Rayquaza was not as careful as we thought in sealing them away."

"That's what we heard too, about the humans," Fen said, then paused. "Mesprit, how much do you know about what's going on currently?"

"Only as much as you. I have, after all, only been able to see things through your eyes until now."

"Wh - what?!" Ryu exploded. "What does that even mean? How-"

"Ryu!" Fen said, gripping the Riolu's arm to calm him. *Your directness is very valuable, but only up to a point…*

"Mesprit, there's still much I - *we* - don't understand," Fen continued. "Are you saying that you're here to guide us to Rayquaza, because

you can't get to him yourself?"

"Yes."

Fen blinked. Though he wanted a straight answer, he didn't expect one *that* straight.

"Well, why then? Why us? Couldn't you have chosen anyone in the world?"

"While I don't wish to be vague with you, answering that question would trigger your memories. I gave you two choices. Unless you wish to continue without any action, which you may do also, I suggest you choose. Otherwise, my abilities to answer you are limited."

"You can take us to Rayquaza right now, then?" Savi said suddenly. The others' heads spun in his direction, but he looked back at them defiantly. "Isn't that… what you're saying, Mesprit?"

"Sadly, no," Mesprit said. *"Not yet. I am not currently at full strength, and I will need all of it to teleport you to the fortresses' entrance. I am recovering quickly though. I estimate… about one day before I am ready. However, even then meeting Rayquaza will not be as simple as walking through an entrance. The barriers we created allow ordinary Pokémon to enter, but once inside they are subjected to a series of trials. I myself am not exactly sure what will await, given the small part I played in them. And I will be unable to give you any kind of guidance once you enter."*

Fen didn't find this too intimidating. Previous experience, from being a Pokémon at least, had taught that things rarely came easily to him. Obviously meeting Rayquaza would be no different.

"Would knowing all these memories help us in getting to Rayquaza?" Fen said. "Aside from just… the knowing of them…?"

"Truthfully, I don't know. It could help you, it could hinder you."

"Is there anything else you can tell us before I make a decision, which might help?"

"Nothing comes to mind. Sorry." Mesprit's responses were unnervingly quick at times. Fen hoped that was due to some superior mythical intellect.

Fen glanced at the 'mon alongside him. "Can I discuss this for a moment?"

"Of course."

Ryu was already next to him, keeping one eye on Mesprit, and he beckoned Savi over, who was stood a few paces back.

"What do you think?" Fen asked them.

" *I* want to know everything," Ryu said. "And I think you deserve to, too. If Mesprit's telling us the truth-"

"Could you stop being so suspicious?" Fen said. "We *have* to trust her. If we don't, we may as well give up everything. She can take us to Rayquaza!"

Ryu frowned. "Okay, well… do you want to do anything? We only really need to wait for her to recover."

"No," Fen said at once. "I… I need to at least know something. I mean, finding Rayquaza… it's possible that we'll die. And we can't predict what might happen after we talk to him. This might be the only chance I ever get to know."

"Then take it! C'mon, you've always thought that what happened to you is linked with the whole state of things here. You might learn something amazing that helps us!"

"I agree, but…" Fen chewed his lip. "I don't get what Mesprit's saying. She said knowing might help me, but might not… but it must! You're right, I feel like the gaps in my memory are all that's been

stopping me understanding everything. But… if not, then…" He groaned and shook his head. "I just don't know. There's too many ambiguities."

Ryu glanced at Savi. "What do you think, 'mon?"

"Well… I don't think it's my place to advise," Savi said. "Fen, Ryu understands you far more than I think I ever will. You should listen to him. But if I had to give any advice, for a situation as unique as this… just choose what's in your heart? I mean, that's terrible advice, but-"

"No, I agree," Ryu said. "This is your life, isn't it? I can't make decisions for you. And look… whatever happens, 'mon, however these memories affect you… I'll still be here for ya. We both will. Always."

And with that, Fen's mind was made up.

"I'll go for it," he whispered to them. He was about to turn back to Mesprit but paused. They needed something to mark the occasion, he thought.

He'd never initiated a Fighter greeting before - admittedly he hadn't had much opportunity to since evolving. But when he held the open hand in front of him, Ryu grinned and returned the greeting with fervour.

"Thanks, bud," Fen said.

"Yeah, yeah," Ryu muttered. " *You're welcome,* and that."

"Give me a vine, Savi?" Fen asked, turning to him.

"I think this needs *two*," Savi replied, snapping both appendages out for Fen to grip, which they laughed at.

Finally, the three of them turned back to Mesprit, and Fen said, "Everything."

Mesprit's face didn't move. *She probably knew already,* he thought.

"Very well," Mesprit said. *"Before I begin you must still your mind. I would suggest closing your eyes. Try fixing a single image in your mind and concentrating all your thoughts on it. I will not begin until your mind is stable enough."*

There was one thought that Fen figured could calm him above all else. "Can I move my tail closer?" he asked.

"Yes, if it helps you."

He moved his tail and enlarged it so he could feel the fire wash over him. He closed his eyes, concentrating on the feeling of warmth.

"Good," Mesprit said. Her Psychic voice had taken on an almost soothing quality now.

He felt a slight disturbance in the wind, then the tiny weight of two hands on his head. As light as they were, they exuded such a power that he barely managed to stop himself from recoiling.

"Remain exactly as you are until I say so. I will now begin."

With those words, her presence in his mind began to grow. He saw lights, no, *images* flash before his mind, but they moved too fast to make sense of. As per Mesprit's instruction, he tried restricting his mind to just the experience of fire. It didn't turn out to be difficult, for he felt like his entire consciousness was being squeezed into that tiny space.

This seemed to continue for a while. Then something suddenly shifted, like an old film skipping forwards. He panicked and instinctively tried to break his mind away, but Mesprit held him down somehow, though doing so made his head pound.

Then the pressure lifted. His eyes snapped open, but Mesprit was still in front of him. Nothing had changed.

He spluttered, "Mesprit, what-"

"You have nothing to fear. It is finished. Your mind is safe."

"It's… finished?"

"Yes."

"So, so… what happens now? What should I do?"

"Take a few deep breaths," Mesprit said, soothing again. *"Concentrate on your fire."*

Fen did so. His trembling limbs became a little calmer.

"Good. Now try thinking back to the earliest memory you can remember."

Well, that was easy; he wouldn't forget waking up in Cheri Forest, without a clue of where he was, in any hurry.

But no. Where previously his recollection ended at that forest, at the leaf brushing his face, now it was like a mental backdoor had opened. The second he moved through it he was assaulted with mental images, thoughts, emotions, words, senses. In his excitement he became lost, darting between memories like an excited child. But soon he lost sight of where he was. He panicked and opened his eyes again, escaping his mind.

Earliest memory. If he looked for that, everything afterwards would fall into place. So he tried again, and this time got a clear image.

He was stumbling through a mass of people, hand held tightly by a much bigger person. She looked down at him and he saw kind eyes, a reassuring smile. His mother. In her other arm a boy some years older, but of similar looks and build. His brother, Stefan.

They sat down in a packed stadium. Some kind of exhibition match. The man nearest their end of the arena, tall and dark haired, threw a poké ball. An Aggron burst out and roared to the delight of the crowd. Later, during a break, the man turned around and waved to the three of them. It was his father, a well-renowned, if not quite world-beating Pokémon trainer.

The memories moved on. Lilycove, his hometown. A small but cosy house, on a hill overlooking the beach and sea beyond. Many afternoons of drinking hot chocolate and gazing at the blue expanse, wondering what lay in the distant lands on the horizon.

More memories of stadiums and roaring crowds. Many fond experiences with Stefan and their mother, but memories of talking to his father were few and far between. He competed in tournaments through most of the year, so could only stay sporadically.

Schooling. Nervousness at his first day. His name called on the register. *Blake.* Blake Fenessy. The small but tight group of friends he formed. All were jealous of his father's exploits. Sleepovers spent staying up late, eating junk food and watching the regional Pokémon championships. Everyone given nicknames; his, Fen, after he jokingly pleaded that they stop calling him by surname.

He and Stefan eagerly attending a holiday camp giving the basics of Pokémon training. Jealousy at being too young to handle Pokémon like his brother. Endless arguments with each other over which Pokémon they'd pick in their dream party, and how they would defeat each other.

A holiday to Sinnoh, a neighbouring region. Watching a match scheduled before his father was on, but it being abandoned after one of the trainers was accidently hurt.

At this point the cheerful, sunlight-esque sheen over his memories dimmed. Seeing the offending Pokémon, a Feraligatr, shot with a tranquilising gun before being locked in a poké ball. His confusion and anguish as he was dragged out of the stadium by his brother.

With that began a growing discontent about how Pokémon were treated. Nights spent researching similar incidents to the Feraligatr. They were numerous, even common in the biggest championships, but excluded from media coverage. And it could *never* be the Pokémon's fault - they weren't designed to fight in such confined, controlled areas. They were being asked to do what they did in the wild.

Thinking for the first time about poké balls, and what they really did to a Pokémon's mind. Concerns bullishly brushed off by Stefan when he raised it one dinner; his mother explaining more sympathetically that this was just how things *were* . But did that make it right?

Trying to ignore these feelings; he'd wanted to be a trainer all his life, why would such a small thing change that? Yet found he couldn't enjoy the championships as he used to. Began making excuses not to watch events with his friends.

Summer. On a walk through the woods, finding a young Cubone, injured, without a mask for its face. Running to the Lilycove Pokémon Centre with it in his arms. Relief that it could be healed. The nurse telling him that Cubone had no recognised trainer. Volunteering to look after it before he could stop himself. Naming him Cubbs. The Cubone's ecstasy when he managed to find a bone that fit its face.

A vast amount of memories with Cubbs. Being amazed at how well the Cubone understood his speech, and learning to decipher the 'mon's own sounds. Going on long walks together. Cubbs growing strong enough to start fighting wild Pokémon they came across. A trainer mistakenly throwing a poké ball at Cubbs, and his fury at them for it. Being told by numerous people to keep Cubbs stored, but refusing them adamantly.

Realising that Pokémon were, in their own way, just as intelligent as humans. Subsequently refusing to eat meat, much to his family's bafflement. Cooking his own meals from then on.

Late school years. Career plans. Overhearing his friends talk about aspirations to work in Pokémon battling; two to be trainers, another in competitive breeding, another in the competitive pharmaceutical industry. His dismay at believing all of it to be cruel and unjust. Abruptly dropping contact with friends, perhaps unfairly. Rowing with Stefan soon afterwards, the day before his brother left for his formal trainer qualifications.

Memories of the final year of school being particularly blurry and grey, almost in black and white. Days missed where he was unable to get out of bed. Finally deciding halfway through the year to pursue a zoology degree, hoping to go into Pokémon conservation. He could think of nothing else that was bearable. Warned by teachers that his mediocre grades wouldn't be up to scratch. Long nights spent slaving over textbooks. Cubbs often turning the pages when he was struggling to stay awake. The Cubone being a personal alarm every morning.

Coming out of exams pleased, but learning his grades just fell short of Hearthome University, where he hoped to go. Difficult discussion with his mother. Eventually deciding to retake the following summer. Her vow to look after him for as long as it took him to succeed, and how grateful he felt for that.

Being visited by a woman working at a local Pokémon refuge centre. Later learning his mother had contacted her. The woman - Mary, her name was - offering part time work to supervise the centre's Pokémon. Agreeing even before his mother could ask what he got paid.

Mary showing him the field he was to watch over, giving some basic first aid and Pokémon-handling training. Spending almost every weekday working long hours in the refuge centre. Taking Cubbs along as he became too big to be left in the house alone. Learning to semi-communicate with each of the Pokémon, as he had done with Cubbs. Soon, their delight at seeing him arrive every morning. Feeling more content than he had in a long time.

From this bright period in his memories, they suddenly darkened again. Watching the news with his mother. Hearing first of the discoveries made with the ancient rocks, then of the meteorite in Meteor Falls. Politicians voting on what to do, and the result being unanimously in favour of trying to wake them. Nearly breaking the TV remote in his anger and despair. Feeling horribly powerless.

Truckloads of workers being driven in to dry up the sea around the ancient rocks. Avoiding news about it as much as possible, continuing his work at the refuge centre. One morning hearing whispers around Lilycove that the workers had succeeded; whatever that meant.

Then his work suddenly being interrupted by a deafening roar. This memory was more vivid than any other, as if he had physically gone back there, to stand in the field. Looking towards the beach and seeing the sight he knew well, of Groudon and Kyogre. The ground crumbling wherever they moved.

Seeing the Pokémon he'd spent so long with, knew so well, panicking and running towards the danger, into surely certain death. Ignoring Mary as his emotions overcome rationality. Catching up with the Pokémon through the footpath to the beach. Finally gathering all of them together, telling them in shouts that they get as far away from Groudon and Kyogre as possible. About to run away with them when a flash of white caught his eye. Cubbs. The Cubone hadn't heard him.

The footpath fast running out. Falling down the last stretch then calling Cubbs' name again. The Cubone finally hearing him, turning towards him with sudden joy and relief in its eyes. Yet barely managing a step before Groudon erupted from the sea in front of them, barely 10 metres away. Seeing the monster's eyes glow and mouth expand. Running forwards, realising too late there was no way to avoid its attack, lunging to catch Cubbs in his arms, screaming something, the air turning red-

"NO!"

He opened his eyes again, panting. For a moment, seeing himself in the same exact place as in that memory made him check himself. But nothing had changed. He was a Monferno.

His heart was beating so loud that Ryu's concerned call of "Fen…?" sounded a long way away. Not that he was listening.

"W-what happened, Mesprit?" Fen gasped. "What happened then?"

She didn't answer through words. Instead he found himself in her perspective now, seeing her own memories.

Groudon and Kyogre rising woke her. From the deep lake she resided in, she moved through flight and teleportation until reaching Lilycove. As the being of emotion, she felt the terror and anguish of everyone around, and it stirred her to act. She couldn't fight the weather gods alone, so she tried calling to her sisters Uxie and Azelf. Yet she could not reach them, and they did not appear.

At first, she found the events impossible to fathom. But then she noticed the massed human machinery off the coast of Lilycove, the drained sea, and thought she understood. Now the humans fled helplessly, victims of the chaos they had manufactured.

Still she waited vainly for her sisters. Then in the sea of bodies fleeing, she noticed a lone human chasing a lost, confused Cubone. The human ran perilously far in his attempts to catch it. From her anger and hatred for humans that had been building, this brave, selfless act made her stop. She found herself praying for the human to make it.

But just as the Cubone was within reach of the human, Groudon burst in front of them.

In the split-second before Groudon attacked, she felt such an extraordinary outpouring of emotion, of care, of love from this human, that she did the most irrational thing thinkable - intervene. She made a Psychic barrier and threw herself between the human

and Groudon. Though she stopped Groudon's fire from hitting, the raw force of the attack was too much for the human. His bones were obliterated.

Yet as the human's body failed him, something unforeseen happened. The human's soul broke from his body, a tiny, pure ball of light. She knew the soul would die in seconds, with the rest of him, if exposed to the fire. She was also weak from blocking an attack of such force. So she transferred what little energy she could into the soul, and made it speed far away from Hoenn, across the sea, to the only place she knew was safe - her home, Kyunn.

Should the soul reach land it would be reborn, and its owner would return to its previous bodily state. But she realised that in the soul's weakness, by giving her own power to it, it would be morphed into something new. Hence the human was reborn, permanently, as a Pokémon.

Mesprit stopped there.

Fen both understood and didn't understand. Mesprit was right; learning so much at once was overwhelming. Not only in pure information, but in the emotions coming back… and the implications of it all…

He looked up the beach towards Lilycove. He recognised the city now, all right. Destroyed as it was, he'd still spent his life on these streets. And he knew where he wanted to go.

Sprinting away from the others, he swerved and dodged through rubble-ridden passageways, taking every shortcut he remembered, until he saw the old, damaged but beautiful house on the hill ahead. No cars were in the driveway. He didn't slow until reaching the door. When that didn't open, he paused, made a silent apology, then wrenched it from its hinges.

Ryu had been too shocked at Fen's sudden bolt to pursue him. He watched the Monferno disappear into the mess of Lilycove, then turned his fear, bewilderment and anger onto Mesprit.

"What's happening?" Ryu demanded of her. "What did you do to him?"

"I only showed him his past," Mesprit said. Her psychic voice wavered a little. *"I was worried this would happen…"*

"But, Mesprit, he just *ran off!* Why aren't you doing anything to help? You know everything he knows, don't you?!"

"I can't help! His mind isn't calm - I won't get through to him. Otherwise, I promise I would try…"

Ryu thought. "Do you know where he is now? Can you take me there?"

"Yes, but-"

"Then let's go! If you can't speak to him, I will. We can't lose him out here…"

Mesprit paused for a moment, then flew closer until he was gazing directly into her electrifying yellow eyes.

"Ryu, tell me: why do you think Fen ran off?"

Ryu frowned. "Because… the amount of thoughts were overwhelming, like you said? His mind's all scrambled."

Mesprit shook her head. *"Yes, but not quite. He is grieving."*

The word was like a stun seed hitting Ryu. He didn't understand. "G-grieving?"

"I have a feeling…" But whatever Mesprit felt then was hidden from Ryu, as she paused. *"Yes. Ryu, you are right; you must talk to him.*

But to do that, you must also understand his feelings. I think… I must show you what I showed him."

"What… his memories?"

"No, my memories. You will see."

And then, without warning, Ryu's head seemed to burst open with new images. He only realised, once it was over, that Mesprit had transferred her own experience over to him.

It took a while to make sense of all the thoughts and emotions moving through him. But once he did, he didn't need an explanation of what he saw.

Perhaps Mesprit's emotions in that moment affected his view of the events too. He was immensely grateful to her now; more than he could possibly express. But he thought about Fen, how he must have watched himself die, practically, and everything in his life he must've remembered, having tried so hard to remember… Ryu understood why he'd been overwhelmed, because he felt it too, just watching.

But he also saw how Fen had tried to protect his lost partner in the face of all the danger and terror in front of him. And in his heart, Ryu found a feeling of compassion so strong he could barely hold himself together. He knew that if there was one thing important in his life right now, it was helping his friend. Fen had lost one partner already - Ryu couldn't let him lose any more.

He looked at Mesprit again, and she nodded back.

"If you're ready…"

"Y-yeah," Ryu said. He turned to Savi, but the Ivysaur spoke before him.

"Explain to me later," he said. "Don't waste time…" He paused, eyes widening upon looking at Ryu properly. "You okay, Ryu?"

"Yeah I am, just… oh…" Ryu shook his head, unable to find the words.

Savi wrapped both vines around his back in a brisk kind of hug. "You've got this, 'mon," he said warmly. "Like I said, you know him better than anyone else possibly could."

Ryu managed to give him a smile. "Thanks. And… thanks," he added to the 'mon floating next to them.

Mesprit didn't reply. She turned and began leading them through Lilycove's streets.

Stumbling into his hallway, the world felt blurry, dreamlike. Fen didn't know where to look. Straight ahead was the living room. His hand found the mantlepiece; it drifted along it absently until a sharp pain pierced his senses. Broken glass. Of course, this was where their framed pictures were.

More aware of himself, he crouched down, shining his tail underneath the wood. His eyes caught a flickering of colours, standing out in the gloom. He reached out for it.

And there he was. He, the skinny, blue-eyed, scruffy-haired teenager, smiling sheepishly as he always did in photos. One arm was around the slightly smaller figure of his mother, who knew 'how to photo', as they jokingly called it, better than he'd ever done. The other arm was supporting Cubbs, who hung precariously off his shoulder. Fen remembered the struggle of taking that photo fondly. The whole day. For his eighteenth, his mother had surprised him with tickets to an exclusive tour around a park between Lilycove and Fortree. It was the biggest large-scale Pokémon reserve on Hoenn, and with some of the scarcest Pokémon on record. A little childish for 18, perhaps, but he loved it there.

But they were only memories now. These were the two beings he loved more than anyone. Yet he'd watched Cubbs die right before his eyes. And his mother… who knew? She might still be alive… the thought sent sparks of joy through his heart. But then he looked at the human between them, and it was extinguished. This wasn't him. Wasn't anyone, not anymore.

He stood and turned to the far wall, where a mirror lay. He'd seen the orange-and-tan reflection, the blue marks on his face, and the long flaming tail many times; but now he knew who this figure represented, who he had once been. And who he would never be again.

His transformation, if he could call it that, was permanent. His human body was extinct. Even his name was no more. These memories were all he had left.

And he knew a Monferno's limitations all too well. He could never speak to a human, to his mother, again. Sure, he had the written language, but it hardly seemed to matter. His life could never return to how it was. He would never go to university, never have a girlfriend, or a job, or a house… nothing.

One part of him hated these memories with every ounce of being. Yet he couldn't let go of them, scared that they might slip away again for good. If he squinted hard enough in the mirror, he thought he could make out the fair-skinned, 5-and-something foot human he'd seen his whole life. But then something stung his eyes, and they lost focus.

"He's here."

Mesprit said it with an odd note in her voice, like she was in pain. The whole journey she had been flying slightly unsteadily.

Leaving the other two, Ryu walked into the dark house. He found the complete unfamiliarity of human houses both fascinating and

disconcerting, but forced that curiosity aside. He was led to the left of the house by Fen's scent - was it his scent? Something he'd unconsciously picked up around the 'mon, anyway. He paused upon seeing a miniscule, frozen form of Fen the human, with a Cubone and another human. A picture, Fen once described them as. Ryu gulped, shook his head and continued.

Then he froze. Towards the end of this room, where he felt a slight breeze, was a sound he was half familiar with, and half didn't want to believe. But he had to go on. The room opened back outdoors, with a small area of grass and the sea, beautifully lit in the dusk, just beyond. A tiny flame revealed Fen lying at the grass's edge, his head buried into it. It didn't do a great job of muffling the crying.

Actually, crying didn't do the sound justice. Ryu had never heard anything like it. Fen was howling, like every emotion inside him was fighting to free itself at once. Ryu's mind had been racing on the journey here, thinking of what he could say, but now he felt as if words were the last thing Fen needed.

Instead, he walked over until side by side with the 'mon and sat down. He reached out to Fen's nearest hand, both of which were resting his head, and gripped it tightly with his paw.

The contact made Fen glance briefly in his direction before slumping back down, though he didn't try moving his hand. It was lucky Ryu didn't know how to flinch. Beyond the face that streamed with tears, it was the look in the Monferno's eyes, a kind of hopeless despair, which hurt him most. It reminded Ryu of how Fen often looked in their very early days together. He'd been so strong ever since.

As time went by, Fen could eventually cry no more. He still continued sniffing for a while, then turned to Ryu. Somewhere deep down, Fen was enormously grateful for Ryu's presence, but that was difficult to reach over all his sorrow.

"Do you know?" he said thickly.

"Mesprit showed me the same thing you saw, yeah."

Mesprit… Fen's thoughts about her were too scrambled. Was she stupid to try protecting him? Should he feel thankful? *Of course he should*, a part of his brain told him. *You wouldn't be here otherwise.* And yet…

"She was right," he said.

"Who, Mesprit? About what?"

"That I shouldn't remember. Probably shouldn't have remembered anything at all."

Ryu stared at him. "Why not?"

"Don't you see?! It's all so… so awful, you idiot!" Fen cried, tears welling up again. "Where do I even begin? I'd been assuming all this time that this whole… *thing* was just temporary…" Lifting an arm in front of his face, he had a sudden urge to rip the stupid orange fur apart. "But it's not! I *died* ! I'm stuck like this forever! What good was it remembering everything about myself if… if that person no longer exists?"

Ryu took some time to respond. "That's not true," he said. "You can still speak to humans through writing. Clearly that part of you is still there."

"That's not what I mean," Fen mumbled. "Writing messages is alright if all we want is information. But for my mum… if, dear Arceus, she's still alive, I won't be able to…" He shook his head. Too many things to put into words.

Ryu didn't speak for a while. Fen's awareness of the world drifted in and out, and at one point he thought he was alone, instinctively clenching his fists in panic. Ryu yelped and pulled his paw away.

"Fen?" he said. "I'm still here."

"Yeah, I… sorry. I don't know what that was."

"I can leave you alone if you'd prefer."

"No, stay here. Please."

So Ryu did. As Fen's arm was still outstretched, Ryu pulled it around his neck and sat closer to him. Fen didn't resist.

"Sorry for calling you an idiot," Fen said.

He saw Ryu smile in his periphery. "I've done the same many a time."

Some more time passed, till the sky was almost black. Ryu shifted.

"It's dark out here now. C'mon, Mesprit and Savi are waiting for us somewhere sheltered."

Fen heard him, but didn't move. He didn't feel capable of it.

"Fen… I'm sorry, but we can't sit like this forever. I know what you've been through is… well, nothing I say can really explain it. But as soon as Mesprit's strong enough we need to go to this place where Rayquaza lives, tell him to stop Groudon and Kyogre, and…" Ryu trailed off.

"I can't," Fen said. "You go. You and Savi. You two could beat whatever trials are supposed to be there."

"What? What are you talking about?" Ryu whispered. "Fen, you were the one who brought us here! You've been leading us this whole time, we've travelled for days and days… you have to go. Mesprit wanted *you* to do this-"

"Well, she shouldn't!" Fen cried, so fiercely that Ryu recoiled a little. He didn't have the energy to shout again, though.

"I don't know why she protected me. I'm not somehow special or important… I managed to convince myself that I was, but… I'm not smart, or a leader, or brave, or strong… I failed at school, lost all my friends for my own fault… and the moment I started to find some meaning in life, it just *ends* because I couldn't protect one of the only things I really cared for. What was the point?"

Ryu didn't reply for some time, fumbling restlessly with his paws all the while.

"Look," he said at last, "what I say might not mean much to you, since I can't replace everyone you've lost. But, at least from me… you're the greatest friend, greatest *Pokémon* I think I'll ever meet, Fen. I don't care what you think, you are smart, and brave, and all of those things. And Mesprit must've felt the same-"

Ryu suddenly stopped, and Fen glanced at him to find out why, feeling immensely guilty for doing so.

"Thought I saw something," Ryu said. Then he sighed heavily. "Forgotten what I was saying, now. Just… please come with me, Fen. I can't bear to see you like this. The others-"

This time Ryu scrambled to his feet. He looked around in that sharp, honed way he often did, but eventually shook his head again. "Maybe it's just the sea," he muttered. "It feels too quie- FEN!"

As Ryu said the word Fen felt a sudden rush of wind, the sensation piercing through to the little part of him that *was* still Pokémon; his instincts. Spinning around, he saw it. A Scyther, flying in mid-air towards him. Both its forearms raised savagely. He couldn't move.

But as the scythes started coming down, a sudden flash of blue appeared between Fen and the beast. There was a sound of flesh being sliced open. An almost silent gasp. One body collapsed; the other landed competently on its clawed legs.

Both Fen and the Scyther stared at Ryu's fallen form, then at each other. The Scyther bared its jagged teeth at him and gave a grotesque, savage smile. So many emotions rose inside of Fen then, but the prevailing one was something new; a violent, murderous anger for this creature.

Now the Scyther couldn't react, as he threw at it everything he could. His whole body was engulfed by flames as he punched and kicked and spat, screaming and crying through the effort; he didn't stop until the Pokémon stopped screeching, a blackened, unconscious heap on the ground, its wings and limbs smashed.

When Fen finally turned back to Ryu, the anger dissipated like a plant being wrenched from its roots. The grass around the Riolu was already soaked with blood. He'd fallen on his back, which revealed the two wounds running from each shoulder-blade to his opposite thigh, making a red X.

Ryu could only gasp two words to him. "Get… help…"

So Fen stood up and howled for Mesprit and Savi. When they appeared, moments later, he felt a flicker of hope. But their equal looks of horror upon seeing Ryu made things even worse.

"Can't you heal him, Mesprit?" Savi was pleading, though he sounded distant. "Or do anything?" Mesprit wasn't levitating, but on the grass with them. If she tried to speak, Fen was unable to hear.

Fen kneeled over Ryu once more, and their eyes met. He had watched a hundred movies in his life where an important character had fallen. As their strength was fading, they would look up at their partner, smile, perhaps utter some fitting last words to them. As if they were somehow content to die right there.

But this was not how Ryu looked. His eyes were wide and fearful, overflowing with emotion. He was biting his mouth to try and stop himself trembling, but it made no difference. He knew exactly what was happening, and it was the most terrifying thing in the world.

Already, a film of what happened was playing on loop in Fen's mind. It had all been so fast. If only *he* had been paying attention, had been listening to Ryu, instead of wallowing in his own self-pity. Then they would've seen it coming. For the second time he was losing his best friend, and for the second time it was his fault. Was there nothing he could do? He looked at his hands desperately, but they showed no sign of healing like they had done with Mesprit.

So he wrapped his arms under Ryu's back and hugged him, not caring for the blood around them, for he knew this would be the last time he would ever have the chance. He could not bear losing Ryu. They had argued and disagreed at times, yes, but they'd barely spent an hour separated though all their time together. Ryu had been a guide, a mentor for him. So much more.

"I'm sorry," Fen whispered. He said the words again and again, as if *they* could somehow repair things. He was devastated for having to take Ryu through so much, all for *his* cause, and it had all been for nothing now, because-

Something changed. Fen trembled. Was it-? No, Ryu was still breathing shallowly. He was faint, but alive.

Then Fen saw the aura sensors. Having never moved beyond a twitch, now they were jerking wildly in all directions. Before he could say anything, Ryu's fur suddenly became burning hot. He scrambled backwards at once.

And he was glad he did. At first, Ryu's body started glowing the same blue as his fur. Then it suddenly burst into light, creating a white silhouette where he lay. All at once, his ears stretched out, face became sharper, sensors expanded and split in two, bumps on his paws became spikes, and every part of him grew in a way that seemed the most natural thing imaginable.

But only when the light had faded did Fen cry out with joy and amazement. Ryu's wounds had disappeared, with not a trace on his new, sparkling pale chest-fur.

Ryu lay still for a moment, then arched his back to look at Fen and the others. His eyes had remained puffy, but they were wide open again. They very slowly moved over his arms, torso, legs, tail, and everything else around him. He reached up with a paw to tentatively brush one of his new ears. He sniffed the air. Finally, he returned to Fen and mouthed something like, "Wha…?"

Fen didn't know what to do either. He half-walked, half-crawled over to Ryu, and hugged him again.

He had no idea how Ryu had evolved, but it didn't matter. What he did know was that he couldn't feel sorry for himself any longer. Because here was someone who believed in him so much that they'd tried giving their own life just to protect his. So he *would* go to Rayquaza's fortress, and somehow find a way to restore peace to Hoenn, whatever it took to do it. Because if Ryu had believed his life to be this valuable, well, he would damn well make sure it was.

Before the Final Storm

Ryu couldn't process everything.

He knew he had evolved. He also knew that his wounds had been healed, though a faint scar on his chest still remained. But as Fen hugged him now, Ryu had the strangest sensation. It was like a bundle of happiness, determination, exhaustion, and a number of smaller emotions that he couldn't pick out - but they all felt external, not affecting his own mental state, even though he could *feel* them just as strongly.

Then he suddenly had a thought. Just to check, he reached up and felt below his ear for his aura sensors. They seemed to crackle slightly with the contact, which had never happened before. They were already working! He must have been feeling Fen's emotions, which made sense - they felt distinctly *Fen-like.* Could he do this with everyone now? Surely not…

He heard a rustle of grass. Savi took careful steps towards him, Mesprit following silently behind. Odd, Ryu thought, how shy the mythical 'mon appeared to be. Maybe his assumption that all legendaries were assertive and vocal was misguided.

"Are you okay, Ryu?" Savi asked.

Ryu looked at the Ivysaur's hesitant expression. There was a vague feeling of relief around him, but it was very hazy. Quite different to Fen. He thought about the 'mon's question.

"I feel okay… physically," Ryu said. "My chest hurts a little bit, but nothing like a moment ago. I'm just… a bit confused."

Savi grinned. "Confusion is normal. I didn't understand these leaves that suddenly sprouted out of my back. You get used to it." He turned

serious again. "But… I'm really glad you're alright. I probably don't need to tell you how bad things looked, but…"

"I know, 'mon." The shock of those events felt as if they'd be burnt into Ryu's mind for eternity. He'd been unable to move, dying. For a moment, when it became clear that no-one could help, and Fen was helplessly over him, he'd even accepted…

No! He shook his head. *Don't… don't think like that. I'm alive* right now*, and that's what matters.*

"Well, I'm glad too," he added, offering a small smile. In return Savi extended a vine to him, which Ryu slapped with a free paw.

"I hate to break you two up, but we need to find shelter somewhere," Savi went on. "Especially now we know that there are still wilds around."

Ryu nodded in agreement. "D'you think it'll be easy to find somewhere?"

"Yes," Mesprit answered. *"Most houses in the centre of Lilycove will be deserted, I imagine. And I can watch for all of you. You deserve a rest."*

"Don't you need rest as well, Mesprit?" Savi asked. "With your recovering…"

"My resting is quite different to yours. More like meditation. If there is any danger nearby, I can detect it and wake you at once. It is… deeply regrettable that I was too far from you, Ryu, to detect the Scyther until it was too late. So we must stay close at all times."

Well, I might not have evolved if it wasn't for the Scyther, Ryu thought, then felt guilty. *Seems pretty selfish to think about it like that. But… why* did *I evolve? It doesn't feel so important, now it's happened, but still…*

That mystery could wait, as Fen was still holding onto him. Ryu wondered briefly if he'd fallen asleep. He nudged the Monferno with a paw.

"Did you hear that, 'mon? We need to get out of here…"

Fen made a strange noise that Ryu interpreted as laughter. He finally pulled away and looked puffy-eyed at them all. "Yeah. Sorry. Some rest would be good, I think."

Fen seemed better than a moment ago, which was a relief. But Ryu's thoughts were distracted as he got up, feeling every movement of his body. *This is incredible! It's like nothing's changed, except everything* has *changed, but in the best way possible… I feel so fast, and strong, and alert, and…*

He noticed Fen turn to him again, as they followed Mesprit away from the cliff edge.

"Hey, um, the things I said to you earlier…" Fen began, but then faltered, his mouth skewed in thought.

"You don't need to apologise," Ryu said. "I wouldn't expect you to take the… information you learned calmly."

"Well, thanks, but it's… more than that. I… am still onboard with this whole thing. I'm going with you and Savi. Ignore the things I said back there; they were stupid. What you did helped me realise that."

Ryu remained convinced that, no matter what could've happened, Fen would have eventually come around again. He wasn't - at least, the Fen *he* knew wasn't - the type to give up so easily. Or give up at all.

"Still," he said gently, "if you need to talk about anything-"

"I appreciate the offer," Fen said, smiling, "but for now we should concentrate on what we need to."

Ryu nodded. "Plenty of time to chill out once we save the world, I guess."

Though he meant it has a joke, Fen's expression seemed to darken for a second before recovering himself. Ryu *felt* the slight worry, too. "I guess so," he replied.

Mesprit was spot on about the houses being deserted; the biggest challenge was instead finding a building with a functioning door and four stable walls. Eventually, they found one wedged among a street of semi-detached houses. Fen even managed to find a key to its door, under a rock on the grass path beside it. Ryu and Savi were mystified by this apparent act of genius, but Fen shrugged their compliments off tiredly. They stumbled through the dark house to a front room and collectively slumped on a large, soft, fluffy surface - except Fen, who kept his tail on the hard floor for safety.

When Ryu woke again, the sky was pitch black. Mesprit's faintly glowing jewels, outlining her low-floating form, were the only meagre light source with Fen's tail out. As Ryu shifted, he sensed her stir too.

"Slept enough?" she said to him. Ryu had heard telepathy before from his parents, but the way Mesprit did it was a wonder. Here, she managed to both convey a question, and do it with a dim, sleepy tone. Her messages had just as much character, maybe even more, than verbal speech.

Ryu opened his mouth, but then realised that now he should be able to respond in kind; particularly as it wouldn't wake the others. He narrowed his eyes at Mesprit. "How do you speak… like that?"

"Try creating a message in your mind, then focus that message onto me," Mesprit said. *"You can certainly do it."*

Ryu tried just that, albeit with the simplest message he could think of. *Hello… hello… hello…*

He got a sudden feeling like a thought leaving his head, and gasped.

"Not bad," Mesprit replied, smiling, despite her eyes still being closed. *"You will quickly get a grasp of it. What were you saying?"*

Ryu carefully tried the telepathy again, eventually getting a slow message out. *"Just that I don't feel tired… but I should probably sleep more, right?"*

"Perhaps," Mesprit said. *"But unneeded sleep isn't always useful. If you want to work on your aura, as I'm sure you're keen to, that would be an equally good use of time."*

How did she-? Ryu decided it didn't really matter how she knew. He trusted Mesprit enough. *"Do you know much about that?"* he asked, attempting to convey the excitement he was practically bursting with.

"About aura? Yes. But how to utilise it? I cannot do so myself, so it is equivalent to trying to teach someone to breathe fire or wield vines. It should come intuitively to you, as most abilities do."

So Ryu tried on his own. He soon found that, with some concentration, he could get a feeling in his chest of a similar energy to the one he could briefly imbue his palms with in attack, yet more deep and unwavering. He started by trying to move some of the energy to his paws, but his hold of it dropped the moment his concentration did. It was difficult work.

Before he knew where the time had gone, the room was growing brighter. Columns of light poked around the sides of a square fabric - Ryu didn't know what it was called - which Fen had pulled in front of the window before they'd slept. Ryu paused his focus, expecting Fen and Savi to be awake, but neither even stirred.

"It's alright," Mesprit said to him. *"They can rest as long as they need."*

Ryu frowned; that somehow didn't seem right. His parents rarely let him lie in… Faoz had been even less willing for the short time they'd stayed at her place… and on their travels it seemed logical to get as much distance covered as possible while it was light. But with his mind practically aching after such a prolonged workout, he decided to enjoy the luxury for a while, and curled back up on the fluffy, soft thing on the floor.

Fen had never felt more welcome to the idea of sleep. Yet unfortunately, his subconscious mind wasn't so keen to shut down. His dreams were alive with images - mostly strange, twisted versions of his human memories. Some were simply unsettling, but many were much more fear inducing; the worst thing was how many times they led to him running onto the Lilycove beach after Cubbs, seeing that awful red light.

After one particularly vivid picture he woke with his heart pumping, and instinctively grabbed his tail. He tried to remind himself: *This is what's real. This is safe.* But the pictures in his head returned the moment he closed his eyes, and he whined feebly.

Though it was just approaching dawn, no-one else was awake. He looked to Mesprit, who was suspended in the exact position he'd last seen her.

"Mesprit?" he whispered.

"Mm," she replied, not opening her eyes.

Fen hesitated on what to say next, and she added, *"You can speak with your mind if you like. It may be easier."*

Fen paused. *"Like this?"* Then he shook his head, confused; he didn't even have to ask how it worked. The telepathy happened the moment he put his mind to it.

Mesprit opened her eyes now. *"Apologies if that is a little strange for you."*

"… It's fine."

Mesprit nodded. *"Was something wrong?"* she asked, in a way that suggested she knew something was.

"I keep dreaming about… things," Fen said. *"It's never happened before. Except when I… wait. You can see my dreams, can't you? And influence them?"*

"No. Dreams are out of my control."

"But… haven't you given me them before? The emotion attacks…?"

"While I was able to give you thoughts and, once you remembered them, visions of old memories, that was only while you were half-conscious; where my influence on your mind could be strongest. Once you fell asleep, as the only active part of myself was with you, I was asleep too. So no, I cannot control your dreams."

Fen took a moment to digest that. It all seemed true with what he remembered.

"But, Fen."

Mesprit's voice suddenly took on an emotional, careful quality. Fen looked up, surprised.

"Sorry, excuse me for asking - what name do you wish to be called?"

He hadn't even considered that. It didn't take long to decide, though.

"It's Fen," he said firmly. *"Blake is associated with too much… negativity. And I don't want to confuse the others right now, or distract them. Seems only right to stick with what's taken me this far."*

Mesprit nodded. *"Fen, then. I'm sorry to hear about the dreams, especially as there's nothing I can do. Coming on top of everything else I have put you through, those things you call emotion attacks, and your visions. Never have I had to… willingly inflict so much emotional torment on another being, but it was all I could do. I cannot apologise enough."*

"Well… that's okay," Fen said. *"The guidance you gave me was infinitely better than none at all. And… you stopped me from dying, Mesprit. I won't forget that."*

"Mm." Mesprit gazed beyond him, into the darkness. *"They are a remarkable thing though, emotions. The power of them will remain infinite across all time, I expect."*

When Fen hesitated, she smiled. *"Apologies. You probably want to discuss non-philosophical matters right now."*

She was right, of course. Fen realised there were still a few unanswered questions on his mind.

"Mesprit," he began, *"before you gave me my memories back, when you warned me about the consequences of them…"*

He hesitated, but Mesprit nodded him on.

"You knew that restoring the bad memories would seriously affect me, right?"

"I thought it very likely, yes."

"So why didn't you just leave them alone, like in the first option you gave me?"

On this rare occasion, Mesprit considered her answer. *"Firstly, it would be cruel to deny you part of yourself. I am not so mean-spirited as some other beings of power… though I probably swing*

too far in the opposite way. And secondly, I knew that if you could handle those memories, you would be stronger with that knowledge."

"That's not how I feel," Fen countered. *"I didn't accomplish anything in my human life. When I* didn't *know that, I could convince myself that I'd been someone important, but now I know that I'm not, I just… don't feel at all special."*

"It was not about who you were, but what you believed in," Mesprit asserted. *"Fen, you cared for Pokémon as much as any human I have known. That is what you need to remember. Besides, raw power is no indicator of greatness. Rayquaza abused his all those eons ago to leave us with this calamity."*

Fen understood but wasn't convinced. He fiddled anxiously with his tail. *"I'm just worried I won't be up to the challenge of this."*

Mesprit flew nearer. *"I cannot reassure you as to what awaits inside Rayquaza's fortress,"* she said, eyes huge and caring. *"But I do believe, having watched you for so long, that you* are *exceptional. And that I made the right decision in saving your life."*

That was a compliment. Fen felt his face heat up. Did he really deserve that from someone as old and wise as Mesprit? No point questioning it. She wanted him to believe it.

"Thank you," he said, quietly aloud.

Perhaps to honour his verbal words, Mesprit just bowed her head in response.

Thinking of that moment again - as much as he didn't want to - reminded Fen of another curiosity. *"I have another question,"* he said.

"Ask away."

"Well, I understand why I became a Pokémon now… but why a Chimchar, of all things? Shouldn't it have been something more like… you, maybe?"

Mesprit smiled. *"Excellent question. It's not like you, or I, seemed to have any sort of choice over what you became, is it?"*

"No. Or if I did, the memories are gone…"

"Mhm. Soul is a curious entity, Fen. I cannot say for sure what gave you this body, but what seems most likely is that your soul - rather, the combination of ours - took the form which resembled it most upon being reborn. Of course, the soul you possess right now is still primarily yours; I am but a small piece. So this Pokémon form must have primarily resembled you."

Fen frowned. Was that all it was? He'd reflected before on how there were easily many worse Pokémon he could've been turned into. Now he considered it, his body was designed for climbing and exploring, which was always something he'd loved. And as for the fire… he knew he had a short fuse if things weren't going his way. Fire Pokémon generally had a similar temperament.

Maybe that *was* the only answer. Mesprit didn't have any other ideas. But it equally seemed like anything could be possible. *Maybe…* he smiled stupidly to himself. Maybe Arceus himself had somehow intervened to give him some choice, only to wipe his memory of the whole thing… or made him take some kind of specifically tailored personality test…

"Any other questions?" Mesprit asked. *"If not, I suggest you sleep some more. I need a little more time before we can leave here; probably about a half-day."*

Fen found her use of the primitive, Pokémon term *half-day* amusing, but didn't comment. *"Just one thing… did you make Ryu evolve?"*

To his great surprise, Mesprit laughed; a tiny little verbal note, but unmistakably a laugh.

"Pokémon can do many things, but freely making others evolve is not one of them."

"Then what did *happen? He was going to die, wasn't he, if he hadn't evolved?"*

Mesprit looked seriously at him. *"Yes, he was. The thing…"*

She paused as they heard a loud yawn nearby. Ryu sat up groggily, mumbling a "Mornin'." He tried to rub his eyes, but the significant muzzle he now possessed confused him for a moment before his paws found the right place.

Then he blinked at the two of them being so close together. "Did I interrupt something?" he asked.

Fen looked to Mesprit, who said, *"No, you've woken up at a convenient time. We were just about to discuss your evolution."*

"Oh," Ryu said, though there was little excitement in his voice. He shifted awkwardly on the rug. "I don't know what made it happen, though."

"I realise that," Mesprit said, *"but I can enlighten you, if you want."*

"What, you know?" Ryu exclaimed. "How?"

"I am very old. And I have known a few Lucario in my time."

Ryu nodded slowly. "Well I'd love to know, yeah." He nudged the dozing Ivysaur beside him. "Hey, Savi. You wanted to know the evolution thing too."

"What?" Savi tried to say, but the word was elongated by a yawn even greater than Ryu's. He shifted his legs slightly so he could look

up bleary-eyed at the rest of them, without exerting much energy in standing up.

"Did you sleep well?" Fen said, smiling.

"Incredible," Savi mumbled. He glanced nervously around them. "Please continue what you were saying, though."

Mesprit did so. *"Ryu. I believe you were told by your parents that a Riolu's aura sensors are useless, and only once they have grown through evolution can they sense and manipulate aura. Is that correct?"*

"Um… something like that," Ryu said. "How did you-"

"That's what you told me, once," Fen interjected. "Mesprit could only hear the same thing as me. I think?"

"Exactly right," Mesprit said. *"Now, your parents were not completely truthful, Ryu. Riolu aura sensors are only useless insofar as they cannot use aura* consciously *. You have had the ability, albeit a subdued one, to use it well before now."*

Ryu frowned. "But why would they lie about that?"

"Because a Riolu can only use aura under certain conditions. It will all make sense in a moment.

"A Riolu's evolution is simply a matter of tuning one's aura enough *to gain conscious use of it. It never had anything to do with physical attributes, special items, or other conventional routes. But tuning aura is a very difficult matter. Aura makes up your very soul, and for that to be in harmony, one must be at peace with themselves."*

"How do you-"

"Achieve such peace? It can be achieved by oneself, through strict and dedicated meditation and mind-training, but a more common method is via a particularly strong friendship. This close relationship

acts as a vehicle for developing aura, though the holder is unaware of it."

"So, hold on." Ryu turned to Fen, his face contorted in concentration. "I remember that time in the mountains… you said I was reading your emotions, but I didn't believe you. Are *you* saying, Mesprit, that Fen was right? And it was because of the friendship we had that I could do that?"

"Absolutely."

"Sounds right to me." Fen smiled. "There's been little moments like that practically from the day we met. When I look at those early days, I feel terrible at how helpless and reliant I was… but the fact you could use aura even then, when it could've only concerned me, means you must've really cared about me, right from the start."

Ryu fiddled with his paws, looking a little embarrassed. "Of course I did… you were on your own, struggling, and I was, well, kinda the same in some ways."

"I should confess that I've kept something from you too," Fen went on. "Back at Mt. Aura, while you were talking to your siblings, Rycaro spoke telepathically to me and said that, while he couldn't say what you needed to do to evolve, it was much more likely to happen if I stayed with you. He knew what was happening."

"Really? Huh…" Ryu frowned. "But why couldn't he tell *me* that? Wouldn't that have made everything easier?"

"I don't think so…" Fen gave Mesprit an 'am I correct?' look; when she gave her approval, he went on. "If you'd known that all you needed to do to evolve was to stay good friends with me, what would you have done? How would you have acted?"

"Well, I'd have still stayed with you!"

"But why?"

"Because… oh." Ryu seemed to understand then. "Because I'd know it would lead to me evolving. Not because… we actually needed each other?"

"That's exactly it," Mesprit said. *"Had you known, it is unlikely you would have evolved. The friendship must be true. That's why you couldn't sense your aura powers growing, and why you were never told about them. I think also that not worrying so much about your evolution helped you achieve peace."*

"Hey, I hadn't heard a mention of evolution since… Sanguin Town, I think?" Fen said. "Heh, I'm glad you took what I told you then to heart… even if I said it more in desperation than anything else."

Ryu raised his eyelids. "It was good advice. And I mean, there's not been room to think about much more than what we're doing now."

You found room to think about it a lot before then, 'mon, Fen thought amusedly.

Ryu looked to Mesprit. "So what I did yesterday was like… the final boost my aura needed?"

"Yes. Throwing yourself in front of a potentially lethal attack for Fen was an incredible mark of courage, selflessness and, most of all, friendship. You should feel very proud for evolving, more so than other species. I'm sure your parents would be too."

"Heh… thanks," Ryu murmured, but he wore a worried frown. "I'm just thinking… what if I'd already evolved when I got slashed? Or if I wasn't close enough to evolving?"

"Well, I can't examine your aura myself, but I can tell you that it works in peculiar ways. You might have been ready to evolve before, but your body was saving it for a time when you would need it most."

"Huh… that's pretty cool, actually." A smile slowly spread across Ryu's face. "Yeah, I like the sound of that more. My aura always had

me covered…"

He seemed to think fondly on this for a moment, then Savi asked, "Ryu, now you've evolved, you can properly use your aura, right?"

"Yeah. I was doing it earlier."

"D'you think you could… give us a little demo?"

"Oh, sure! Lemme just get ready…"

"I'm expecting big things," Savi added mischievously.

Ryu smirked, closing his eyes. His aura sensors started twitching. A blue light appeared very briefly between his paws, but then he made a frustrated "ngh!" sound and it evaporated.

"I was- I was doing it better than that earlier!" he protested, as Savi chuckled. "It's 'cause you're all looking at me, it messed up my concentration. Mesprit, it was better earlier, wasn't it?"

Mesprit had been gazing beyond them, and Ryu's question made her pause for a moment. " *I… suspect you were too impatient just now, Ryu. You cannot rush focus.* " She floated upwards slightly and addressed them all. " *Perhaps I should have told you this earlier, but: I need to leave you for a short while, to check on the location of Rayquaza's fortress. I cannot teleport unless I have an exact image of where I want to go, and I have not visited this place in eons."*

Fen blinked. This was unexpected. "How long will you be?"

"I will be back well before dusk," she promised. *"If there is any danger, contact me. I am strong enough now to protect you, should you need it."*

So, after some brief goodbyes, she flew out of the open window and disappeared into the sky.

"Huh," Ryu said. "We've got a while. Any ideas on what to do?"

"We could try finding food," Savi suggested. "I doubt there'll be much of it in this… fortress place."

Fen had had so much to worry about that the thought hadn't crossed his mind; but now Savi mentioned it, it must've been a day since they'd last eaten. Ryu's surprised reaction suggested the same. "Going outside at all will be dangerous," Fen warned, thinking back to yesterday.

"Yes, but basically anything we do is dangerous," Savi replied. "We could still be attacked just sitting here, you never know. *Not eating* would certainly be dangerous."

"Also, we might not have to go outside," Ryu said. "What if there's already food in this house?"

Fen hadn't thought of that. He smiled to himself. *These two have such scavenger's instincts…*

Unfortunately, it quickly became clear why this house had evaded the attention of wilds. Every cupboard and compartment was bare of food. But Ryu continued to search even when Fen and Savi had given up. "I swear I can smell *something,* " he muttered. "I don't know what it is, but… ah! Here."

He pulled out a large glass bottle from the back of a cupboard, filled with clear liquid. Seeing it in the dim light, Ryu frowned. "Weird smelling *water* ? Huh… I guess it can't be bad if it's clear, but still…"

Fen was keeping half an eye on a window, where storm clouds were quickly gathering. Only when he saw Ryu unscrew the bottle and start glugging did he realise the problem.

"Ryu, no!" he yelped, running over. "Don't drink that! It's…"

As he reached for the bottle, Ryu spat the liquid everywhere. He fell to his knees and choked for a few seconds, while a good deal of the bottle leaked onto the floor.

Ryu eventually levered himself back up with the help of a wall. "What the… what *is* that?" he cried, staring at the bottle like it wanted to kill him. "It wasn't water… oh Mew, my throat is *burning…* was that poison? Do humans keep poison around?"

"It's not poison," Fen said, checking the bottle's label. He tipped what hadn't leaked of it down a sink, which he was almost too small to reach. "At least, humans wouldn't *call* it poison. But alcohol isn't good for you. Especially not…" he shuddered to think of Ryu's experience, "… straight vodka. How much of this did you swallow?"

Ryu coughed again. "Not much. I realised after a gulp that it was bad."

"Well, if you feel at all lightheaded, or the world gets a bit blurry, don't panic. It'll pass soon enough."

"What?" Ryu moaned. "That doesn't sound fun."

Fen didn't mention the irony that, to most people, it *was* supposed to be fun. Nor did he admit that all he knew about Pokémon and alcohol was that they weren't supposed to mix. He hoped that it didn't mess with Ryu in any unforeseen way.

"Are you okay?" Mesprit asked, suddenly entering his head. *"I sensed panic."*

"Yeah," Fen replied. He wondered whether to explain. It was easier not to for now. *"Uh… yeah. Don't worry."*

Mesprit seemed too busy to ask for details, which was a relief. When the bottle was empty, he stared at the sink for a moment, feeling like he was forgetting something. Then he realised; *the tap!* He turned the cold one and, after a slight juddering, a thin stream of water came pouring out.

"Yes!" he said triumphantly. " *This* is definitely water."

He took three cups from an already-searched cupboard and passed one to Ryu and Savi. "Water will help too," he told Ryu as they drank thirstily, each of them finishing two cups' worth, before Ryu went on to refill their water flask.

"At least we got something good from this," he said, screwing the lid back on. "But… no food. Guess we should try the houses nearby?"

"I'm not sure about that," Savi said, looking out of the window.

Rain was suddenly falling so hard and fast that the street opposite was barely visible. Fen quickly noticed the howling wind accompanying the drumming on their house's roof. Just the thought of being caught outside made his stomach jump a little.

"We can't go out now," he agreed. "Especially since this is the only house around that's not hopelessly exposed to the weather."

"And not to mention the chance of debris falling on us… *and* wilds," Savi said, shivering. "Hopefully this storm doesn't last long…"

All they could do was go back to the room with the rug and wait. Ryu kept them entertained for a little while as he practised creating aura, though he quickly got tired from the effort. The only other thing to do was try and rest.

The storm raged relentlessly. The constant reminder of possible danger made it difficult to relax; and most of the random thoughts that ran through his mind weren't very calming either. The one concerning him most, which he hadn't been able to shake off, was that if they miraculously stopped Groudon and Kyogre, what would the aftermath be? He knew it was foolish to think about such a contingent future. But if they *did* succeed, and Hoenn became safe again, he felt as if-

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Fen sat up at once, startled. Ryu and Savi had reacted similarly. *What was that?* he thought. *Did something hit the house?*

There was silence for a moment. *Maybe it just hit the roof.* He squinted at the window, but it was impossible to see anything beyond.

There was more banging then; it must have lasted 30 seconds before ceasing. Fen realised with a jolt what the sound was, or he thought he did.

"What the hell's happening?" Ryu whispered in an urgent tone.

"It sounds like the door," Fen told them. "But that doesn't make sense. Why would a wild 'mon bang on the door? It would just try breaking in here, if it wanted us…"

"Maybe it's a human?" Ryu suggested.

The banging came again.

"What do we do?" Savi hissed; this time the banging didn't seem to stop at all. "They're gonna break down the door at this rate!"

Fen shook his head in dismay. "We can't sneak outside with this storm going on. We'll have to open it."

"Well, we can at least prepare for that," Ryu said. "I'll get the scarves ready."

Fen put on the evasion scarf, Savi got next to the door before Ryu helped him fasten the element scarf, and the Lucario kept the most dangerous of them in his paws. The door was solid wood, so nothing of the outside was visible. Fen twisted the key to unlock it, then with a nod to the others, swung the door wide open.

It wasn't a human in a front of them. Nor, it seemed, a wild. It was a tall, bipedal Pokémon Fen had never seen before. Its unkempt grey

fur was soaking wet, as was the huge, red-and-black mane which fell behind it, almost to its feet.

The Pokémon's green eyes widened at the sight of them, but not aggressively. It stood there for a moment, panting, looking very unsure of itself. Fen had no idea how to respond. Was this Pokémon frightened of them? Was it injured? Could it even speak?

Then Ryu stepped in front of him. He looked at the Pokémon very carefully, and asked, "Zephia?"

The Pokémon gasped, then gave a little nod. "Ryu?" she squeaked, sounding as if she hadn't spoken for days.

Ryu suddenly broke into a grin, and practically leaped forwards to hug her. Zephia stumbled backwards, looking startled at the display of warmth. She didn't return the hug before Ryu clumsily stepped back again.

"Uh… sorry," he said sheepishly. "It's just… good to see ya again. Are you okay? Not hurt or anything?"

Zephia shook her head. "Could I come inside?" she asked meekly, still standing on the exposed doorstep.

"Yes!" Ryu and Fen said at once. They exchanged a glance, and Fen added, "You… don't need to ask, Zephia. Come in." He realised how strange that question sounded, coming from Zephia's mouth. He couldn't remember her asking *any* kind of permission before.

Zephia took one forward step of her newly clawed feet, then stopped. "I, uh… found something for you," she muttered, stooping down and reaching to the side of the door. "Here. You're probably hungry."

A dead Zangoose, as soaked as her, was in her arms.

Though the sight of it gave Fen a little discomfort, he couldn't help smiling. *Maybe she hasn't changed so much.* "That's… very nice of you," he said.

"It only happened a moment ago," Zephia said quickly, "and I didn't really *mean* to kill it, but these wilds-"

"Hey, it's fine." Ryu smirked at her. "We needed some food. The gift's much appreciated."

Zephia's mouth curled upwards slightly, and she put the body to one side. "Could you stand back for one moment?"

The three of them looked confusedly at her. "To dry myself," she added helpfully.

With a collective murmuring of 'oh', Fen got behind the others, and watched Zephia shake herself ferociously. She even wrung out her mane afterwards, creating a small puddle on the floor and making the fur look even more bedraggled. Then she just stood still again, uncertain.

"Zephia," Savi said after a short silence.

"Mm?"

"Forgive me for asking, as you look wet and exhausted, but I can't understand… why you've come here? From what I heard, you were never on our side in this, had no intention to help us… I mean, you ran off, didn't you? Have you changed your mind about all that?"

Zephia sat down on the floor. The question somehow seemed to make her more comfortable. "I figured you would ask. Was expecting one of *you two* to do it, in fairness." She glanced at Fen and Ryu as if they'd done something wrong. "It's hard to say exactly why I came back. Everything you've said is true, Grass."

"Savi," he corrected, with a tinge of irritation. "Well, what did you do after you left us?"

Zephia frowned. "To be honest… I'm not sure. My memory's fuzzy. I couldn't bear staying in the cave alone, so I just wandered, finding food and shelter wherever I could… basically what I'd done before I first came across all of you.

"But I found it just… wasn't right any more. It felt empty. Meaningless. I don't know. When I was with you 'mon, things were at least a little more interesting. We were going places. And greater numbers is helpful, when all the wilds in this place act like the only way to stay alive is by fucking killing each other, y'know."

Savi hesitated, and she added, "I'm here to help you, if that's what you wanted to hear."

"That *was* probably part of it," Ryu quipped. "Well, we're glad to have ya back." Fen and Savi assented to that.

Zephia just looked at the Zangoose on the floor. "Should probably eat this, if we don't want to get challenged to it by wilds."

"Oh Mew, it's like in that clearing with the Tauros…" Ryu paused, then chuckled. "Wait, you weren't even there, Zephia. Wow. Some interesting stuff happened while you were gone…"

"Actually, before we move on," Fen interjected, "could you explain… how you *found* us, Zephia? You say you spent a few days wandering. You couldn't have been following us from afar, could you? Did you… oh, did you find Faoz and Shaice?"

"No," Zephia said. Her eyes narrowed. "What d'you mean, find them? Are they not here with you?"

"No, they're… we had to leave them behind." Fen quickly explained Shaice's injuries and as he did, he realised that over a week, though he'd forgotten the exact number of days, had passed since they'd

separated. They added to the very long list of people and Pokémon who he could only *hope* were doing okay. The solemn looks Ryu and Savi wore suggested they were thinking the same.

"Shame," Zephia murmured when she'd finished. "I liked Faoz. Knew what she was doing." She readdressed the others. "Well, for me, I started by retracing my steps to that town we'd come from, then…"

Her eyes kept getting drawn to the Zangoose. "Can we just eat this first? I'd prefer not to be the cause of us getting savaged."

"Fine," Fen agreed, already starting to retreat towards the front room where he wouldn't be able to see her. Though he could accept eating meat when necessary, his stomach still lurched at the thought of dissecting it, as Zephia would do. It was somewhat reassuring to know that was *one* thing he'd inherited from his old self.

It was a much-needed meal when it did arrive, just as the Tauros had been a few days ago. After they'd finished, as a precautionary measure, Ryu squeezed outside and chucked the Zangoose's remains as far as he could into the still-horrendous storm. Then Zephia finally finished Fen's question.

"I had no idea where you'd gone after the cave, but given all the talking you did with the humans in that building, Fen, I figured they might have an idea."

"You… you spoke to the humans in Fallarbor?" Fen asked, astonished.

Zephia nodded. "It was tough, obviously, given I don't speak their language-"

"No, I mean - it's amazing you got help from them!" Fen said. "Given how you were before with them… when Faoz had to put you to sleep."

"Oh." Zephia huffed. Praise never went down well with her, Fen had noticed. "I *suppose* I was quite determined to find you again. My thoughts about those humans needed putting to one side."

"How did you communicate with them, Zephia?" Ryu asked eagerly. "Surely it was impossible, if you couldn't write like Fen?"

"Well, I figured they would trust Fen, if no one else, so I took on his appearance as I approached. Once I was inside I reverted to normal, making sure they knew who *I* was, and then did illusions of all of you in turn, pointing to myself, as if to ask where you'd gone. Somehow, they understood. It surprised me, too. One of them gave me *this-"* She reached into a furry pocket between her mane and ear, pulling out a small, round device. A compass. She looked at it and gestured with her other arm. "They said to follow the arrow in this direction. Someone even drew a little sketch of the place I needed to look for. All I gathered was that it had a lot of buildings, and this seemed to fit that."

Fen was amazed. It warmed his heart to know how much the human group in Fallarbor had wanted this random team of Pokémon to succeed, when they themselves were helpless.

"What about finding *us* ?" Ryu asked.

"I went to a hill to look around, and I saw three figures that looked like you," Zephia said. "That was yesterday. I lost sight of you quickly afterwards. Didn't catch your scent until this storm began. I figured you'd be sheltered in the best-looking house, and I could tell once I'd reached this place's door that you were here. That's it." She said it like her whole story had been an idle chore. "Now, could *I* ask: what's the plan here? You do have one, don't you? Or have you already accepted defeat, and found the nicest burial ground you could?"

"No!" Fen exclaimed. "We have a plan! It's… hold on." He suddenly remembered Mesprit. *"How are you doing?"* he asked her.

"Almost back with you. Everything okay?"

"Good. Zephia's here to help us. She came back!"

It was the first time Fen had sensed any feelings of surprise from Mesprit's signals. He suspected it might be the only time. *"That's… that's wonderful,"* she said. *"Wow. Well, I have good news too. I'll explain more shortly when we're together."*

Their connection broke off. Fen found Zephia staring incredulously at him.

"What was *that* ?" she demanded, then glared at the others' less surprised looks. "Your eyes just… someone wanna tell me what's going on?"

What a question, Fen thought, sighing. He quickly explained the situation with Mesprit, whom Zephia didn't recognise the name of. Given the Pokémon was native to Kyunn, and there had seemed little time for tall tales in Zephia's upbringing, it didn't surprise him. But Zephia wasn't content with knowing that Mesprit was merely 'here to help them'; when she pressed, Fen had little choice but to tell her the truth about himself - Savi, he only realised then, hadn't known either. The Ivysaur said he had held back from asking, suspecting it to be linked with Fen's loss of control the previous day.

Savi was almost lost for words once he said it. "'Mon, I… you didn't have to tell us that…"

"It's fine," Fen said firmly; at least he hoped it sounded firm. He'd not gone into much detail about his previous life, but just having to *think* about that part of his memories was difficult enough. "You deserve to know."

Zephia too looked quite taken aback. She said little in response, but looked at Fen with a respect that he hadn't seen before.

They sat in silence for a few moments, before Ryu conveniently found a change of topic. "So Zephia… you've evolved too," he said, a glint in his eyes. "How'd it happen?"

Zephia just shrugged. "There's no dramatic story like yours. I was in a fight - with another Dark, actually. They were clever, but I outfought them, and just after I got the finishing slash, my body felt really… fiery. Like it had all this energy. But that felt really good, so I just let it come over me… then I realised I was evolving."

"… That's it?"

"What else is there to say?"

"I dunno… wasn't it weird at first? Like, you're walking on two legs now."

"Well, it did take a while to get used to that. Even now, it feels right to hunch over a bit. More stable, closer to the ground. I think that's natural for Zoroark, though."

"Must've been cool to have proper arms, though."

"Again, I'd gotten used to managing without."

"Arms are overrated, anyway," Savi quipped, appearing to sense Ryu's building frustration with Zephia's utter lack of enthusiasm. "They're so limited. *Vines*, though, they can do pretty much anything."

"They can't land a killer punch," Ryu objected.

Savi opened his mouth, then paused. "Vines fight more… elegantly than that. Meaning they'd trip you up instead."

"Hmmm." Ryu grinned. "Savi, aren't you supposed to evolve again some time?"

Savi's smile suddenly dropped. "I am, yeah," he said.

Ryu raised his eyelids. "Is that a bad thing?"

"No, it's just…" Savi sighed. "I don't really *want* to evolve again? I've seen Venusaur before, and they carry such a huge weight on their backs, and move so slowly… it's just not what I want. They're powerful, sure, but I wanna be able to run around, y'know?" He smiled bashfully. "Probably my fault for growing up with a group of Electrics who are built for that sort of thing."

This detail suddenly caught Fen's interest. "You can stop yourself evolving, can't you?" he asked. He had definite memories of such a practice happening in beauty contests, where it seemed the smaller and cuter the Pokémon, the better. He silently cursed at the reminder of it.

"Well, *apparently*," Savi answered. "I've never seen it happen. But some say you can stop yourself mid-process if you think hard enough about it. Others I've heard say the evolution won't happen at all if you really *don't want* it to. I hope that's true."

They were interrupted by a sudden flash of light from the window. Mesprit appeared in the room, and along with her were two almost identical-looking Pokémon. The only difference in their floating, jewel-encrusted bodies were the colour and shape of their heads; while Mesprit's was pink, with long appendages, another's was yellow and rounded, and the third blue and pointed.

Mesprit addressed their stunned expressions. "These are my sister guardians, Uxie and Azelf," she said out loud, which made them jump again, even though it was no different from her telepathic voice. "I have been able to reach them, at last, and now I can confirm a few details about Sky Pillar. It is all clear to travel."

"You can speak now," Ryu stated.

"Yes. I need to, given Darks like Zephia cannot pick up telepathy." Mesprit glanced at the Zoroark. "It's good to finally meet you, Zephia."

Zephia looked warily back at the tiny bundle of light. "You too… Mesprit."

"If everyone's ready, we'll explain," Mesprit said.

"Um." Fen glanced at Ryu. "How do you feel?"

"What? Fine!" Ryu looked bemused until Fen mimed a drinking action to him. "… Oh," he murmured. "But no, still fine. Honestly, I can't feel anything different."

Fen gave a sigh of relief. It *was* a few hours ago, now. "In that case, we are ready," he said to Mesprit, who thankfully didn't question what had happened.

The yellow Pokémon called Uxie spoke, in a soft, dreamy voice. "We cannot travel closer than the very edge of Sky Pillar, due to the barrier Rayquaza imposed on us. So once there, you must climb the rest yourselves. It is only a moderate height. At the top, there is a key that will gain you entry into the fortress itself."

Mesprit continued. "We don't know exactly what the key is - those matters were Rayquaza's work. But this is where you come in, Ryu. Have you gotten a grasp of your aura by now?"

"Huh?" Ryu said. "I… well, I think so…"

"Good. You'll need to search for a strong aura up there; whatever that belongs to should be the key. It shouldn't be difficult to find, as the Pillar is derelict of anything other than rocks.

"None of us will be able to communicate with you once you've gone past the barrier," the final guardian, Azelf, added in an assertive tone. "And this storm is as bad as I've seen, so stay together on the journey up." She clapped her hands together, though they made no discernible sound. "We'll be cheering for you! You can do it!"

"On that point…" Mesprit turned to Fen. "Once you cross the barrier, I believe the link our minds share will be broken."

"What? Will that mean anything bad?" Fen asked, eyes wide.

"For you, there should be little to worry about," Mesprit said. "You may get a little psychic sensation, but that would be all. That small part of my soul belongs to you now. It cannot be removed."

Fen relaxed, but slowly realised what Mesprit was implying. "Will *you* be okay?"

"I will lose a proportion of my powers. But as long as I live, I can recover from any manner of affliction with time. Don't worry about me."

"Okay…" Fen nodded slowly. "We won't be able to speak telepathically anymore, though?"

"Correct. But that shouldn't be an issue. I will stay in Sky Pillar while you're gone, until you return."

"Well… okay." Though Fen wanted to ask more, he trusted that Mesprit had it all worked out.

"To teleport, you need to be touching some part of me," Mesprit went on, addressing the four of them now. "I would suggest holding my tails. Uxie and Azelf will stay here; more than one Pokémon teleporting to the same location at once is not wise."

She hovered to be between them. Ryu put his aura-marked bag over his shoulders, and joined Fen, Savi and Zephia in a rough square around Mesprit.

Fen glanced at the others' expressions. Ryu seemed a little worried by the new responsibility thrust upon him. Savi's body was tense, but he wore a fierce look of determination. Zephia was impossible to read.

There really was no going back from here, he thought. They would come out of Sky Pillar with either the world saved, or nothing. Both scenarios seemed impossible to imagine.

"Ready?" Mesprit asked again, and this time they barked an impatient chorus of approval back at her. "Brace yourselves, then," she said. "We go on three: one, two-"

Another flash of light; then the world vanished.

The Dungeon: Part 1

The teleport was like… nothing at all. All Fen knew upon landing was how nauseatingly dizzy he felt.

Stumbling backwards, his hand latched onto a boulder to balance himself. They were exposed to the rain out here, but the pain that wrought at least helped clear his head a little. Once steadier, he saw from Savi and Ryu's grimaces, with the latter's body untidily strewn on the ground, that the teleport hadn't been easy on them either. Only Zephia looked relatively unmoved by it.

They were on an island of floating rock, a few feet above the sea. *Lucky that this boulder was here,* Fen thought alarmedly, noticing the raging tide below them. There seemed nothing around but pure, unrelenting sea. The fear it induced in him was almost as strong as the teleport's effect.

"EVERYONE, PAY ATTENTION! FEN! IGNORE THE WATER!"

Mesprit's mental voice screamed at him; it was just as well she didn't need to open her mouth, for Fen couldn't hear a thing above the howling gales. He turned to where she was gesturing. Ahead was surely the 'pillar' in the island's name. It was a spire-like tower of rock, smaller than what Fen expected, and gaps in the structure revealed interior steps to aid the climb to its peak. Yet those gaps contributed to the tower's jagged, lopsided appearance, which worried him.

Nevertheless, Mesprit's words stirred them into action, and they scrambled towards an arched entrance where the climb began. Before walking through, Fen turned back to Mesprit, who hadn't moved. The rain somehow evaded her body, as if an invisible barrier was around her.

"Is this the threshold?" he asked.

"Yes. Go on!"

Fen had a sinking feeling about this moment, but there was no choice. The others, realising the same thing, were waiting with anxious faces on the other side of the arch. Finally, he stepped forwards.

The feeling was almost like he'd teleported again, for the next thing he knew after moving was that he was being held up by a strong pair of furry arms. Then he suddenly regained control of himself, as if nothing unusual had happened, and lifted his head up to find Zephia looking sternly back at him.

"I'm fine," he said quickly.

"You realise you just fainted?" Zephia said.

"I know, but - Mesprit said that would happen. I'm fine now."

Huffing, Zephia let him go. Fen looked back through the arch. Mesprit didn't look any different, except… the rain was hitting her now, already dripping from her tiny body. She was mouthing 'go' at him repeatedly.

He didn't feel different, at least. He trusted that Mesprit was right about that.

"Come on," Fen said, turning and hurrying Ryu and Savi, who were looking at her too. He forced himself not to turn back again.

His suspicions about the tower's interior were correct. While it was more protected from the weather, the rock steps were all slippery, regularly cracked and occasionally just missing. Savi threw his vines at whatever he could for balance, while the others ground claws into every step to do the same. Any wrong step could be fatal.

But they reached the top unscathed. This was a square plane of rock, without any roof. Its edges, which streams of rainwater tumbled

from, ran straight into the sea, and the centre was covered in debris.

Remembering Mesprit's instructions, Fen looked to Ryu, and the Lucario looked back at him. "Hold me steady," he said, almost having to shout over the noise. "Need to concentrate."

Fen did so, while Savi and Zephia stood next to him in case *he* lost balance. Ryu tensed and closed his eyes… but for barely a second before he gasped and re-opened them.

He nodded at them, then took careful steps across the square, stopping at the centre. On all fours he began scrabbling in the debris, shoving rocks aside until reaching the platform underneath. He seemed to start pulling at the platform itself, and Fen was starting to worry for him when something inside it came loose.

Ryu withdrew, panting, and held it up a dense, smooth-looking rock about the size of Fen's hand. "It's this," he said.

"Well, what do we do with it?" Zephia asked. "Do you know?" Other than its apparent aura, nothing about it seemed special.

Ryu squinted at the little object, then exclaimed, "It's got runes on! Tiny ones, but…" He held the rock so close that it almost touched his long muzzle. "It says… 'direct me to my maker'… I think?"

"Let me see?" Savi asked. Ryu held it to him, and the Ivysaur pored over it in a similar manner, frowning. "I'm reading the same," he said. "Can I hold it?"

Ryu passed it over at once. Savi slowly turned it over in his paws, tapped it on the ground a few times, scratched at it with a claw. In the bitter cold, Fen was on the edge of demanding for some clarity before he finally spoke.

"This is too tough to be a rock," Savi said. "It's a scale. Like one of mine… Fen, could you shine your tail on it?"

Fen inched forwards on the cold rocks and did so. They gasped. There was plenty of light in the day yet, they hadn't been fumbling in the dark, but it was as if his flame had unmasked an entirely new pigment in the relic. It shone a brilliant green.

He and Savi looked at each other, eyes wide. The Ivysaur said, "This has to be-"

"The sky," Fen blurted. "That's - that's where Rayquaza lives. The sky! The scale is his, right? If we're directing Rayquaza's scale to him, it needs to be upwards."

Savi nodded and held the scale up with a vine. Suddenly, the green light given by the flame beamed in every direction. Fen was almost blinded; the storm, tower, wind and flashes of lighting all disappeared from sight, yet somehow the three Pokémon with him did not…

It felt like there was a *pop* . Fen opened his eyes, not realising they'd closed. They looked around at each other.

Ryu began saying, "What…" but there were no more words. None of them could find one to describe their surroundings.

Now, instead of rocks underneath them, there were clouds. At least, that was what it looked like; a solid, fluffy whiteness. The sky around them, if it was sky, was so misty that they could see nothing ahead.

The strangest thing was that none of them seemed to have moved. They were stood and crouched exactly as they had been… or so Fen thought, before Ryu yelped next to him.

"W-where's my bag?" he cried, swivelling frantically. "It was on my back, I swear! It can't have come off!"

Savi lowered his outstretched vine. The green scale was gone too. He looked at Fen and just shook his head, mystified.

For a minute, Ryu looked and paced around the whiteness hopefully, but the bag had truly vanished. After that, he tapped the surface underneath them, then punched it lightly. Nothing happened; no sound, no movement, apparently no pain on Ryu's part. He looked exasperatedly at them. "Any ideas?"

"Not to panic, maybe," Zephia said. "Seeing how bizarre this is, we must have done *something* right to get here. As for actual action… only one I can see is to walk somewhere."

"Walk… *somewhere*," Ryu repeated.

"Either that, or we just wait in this blank abyss for something to *appear*," Zephia snapped. "I know which sounds more appealing."

Like Ryu she turned in circle, and when that revealed nothing she started in an apparently random direction. With no good reason to object, the three of them followed her.

"Mesprit said that reaching Rayquaza would involve trials," Fen said to Savi alongside him. "I guess that scale was the first. And… presumably this place will hold the next one."

"I hope they're all as simple as the scale, then," Savi replied. "It was pretty lucky that those instructions were all in the runes we know, though. Could've been a really ancient language, or something."

It was *lucky,* Fen thought. *That's odd, that there was no human language. Is Rayquaza only willing to meet Pokémon? Maybe he just can't speak to humans…*

He was distracted by his foot brushing something - something that wasn't cloud. Looking down, he yelped; it was a rock. There were rocks all around his feet.

He and Savi, both noticing at once, exchanged baffled looks, then looked around them. Their whole surroundings had changed. From pure whiteness, they were now on a rocky mountain, like many that

he and Ryu had crossed on the way to Darkrai's Knot. A strong wind came with their new altitude.

Fen turned behind him, but instead of whiteness the mountain dropped straight down, as if it had been sliced off. The only way was ahead, where the mountain sloped sharply the other way. Beyond that, he couldn't make out anything.

"Guess we've found a direction," he said to Savi. He noticed the Ivysaur looking nervous, repeatedly swivelling back and forth, as if this place demanded some explanation.

"I… I don't like this," Savi muttered eventually. "And… where did Ryu and Zephia go?"

Ryu knocked on the dark grey wall again, but it wouldn't budge. He checked for any weak spots or passages, but there were none. He wouldn't try punching again after how much that hurt the first time.

The clouds had taken them to a strange-looking place. Its terrain reminded Ryu of a cave like Darkrai's Knot, or the one they'd lost Zephia in. But despite there being no natural light, the place was somehow lit up - rather dimly, but enough to see in. And the corridors and passageways which were in abundance around them all seemed too precisely made for his liking. Though it was still less surreal than walking through cloud.

More importantly though, Fen and Savi had vanished from them without trace.

"I just… don't understand," Ryu said, voice rising in exasperation. "They were right behind me. Mew, I heard them talking! How could we have lost them?"

"We'll find them," Zephia growled. "Look, there's only one Rayquaza as far as I know. If this place exists to lead us to him, we should meet each other again. All we've done is walk forwards, anyway."

"But they might… I don't know, go wrong somewhere…"

"They might," Zephia agreed. "But we can't affect their actions. There's no point worrying."

With a *hmph,* Ryu gave up and followed her.

"What d'you think this place is about, then?" he asked. They walked straight on, ignoring passageways either side of them. This method seemed less likely to get them lost.

"'What it's about'?" Zephia repeated.

"Yeah. We're meant to be doing some kind of trial, right? To reach Rayquaza?"

"Maybe the trial is to bore us to death," Zephia muttered.

Ryu was fairly certain he could rule that out. But then… were they somehow missing something? This cave place, whatever it was, was completely silent but for their footsteps. There were no scents other than their own. He looked at the walls, at the floor, but nothing gave off even the slightest bit of intrigue.

Then he glimpsed something bright in the very distance. It looked like an identical archway to the one they'd entered from. Only light seemed to lie inside it, but Ryu had an instinctive feeling that going through this door was a good idea. He tapped Zephia's shoulder. "D'you think that-"

At that moment, his ears twitched; a sensation he was still acclimatising to, given their new size. The sound itself was too quiet for him to make out anything beyond its occurrence. But as he glanced sideways, Zephia had stopped walking beside him. Her eyes were wide.

"Zephia?" he said. "You heard that noise too?"

Her eyes flicked to him, and she gave a jerk of her head, but otherwise stayed completely still.

"What is it-"

"Shush!" Zephia hissed at him, despite Ryu's question barely being above a whisper. As she glanced around them, Ryu heard the sound again. It sounded resoundingly *Pokémon*, and came to the right of them, but was still so distant that he could tell nothing else. But Zephia darted away from him at once, stalking down a passageway in the sound's direction.

What the hell… Ryu hurried after her, grabbing an arm. "Zephia, I think I saw a way out ahead of us! Why are you following this… this sound? Isn't that a bad idea?"

She hissed wordlessly at him, struggling to pull free, then the sound came once more. No - it was two sounds together, Ryu realised. One very low and throaty, the other a little higher. They didn't sound aggressive, but he didn't trust them either… and they also sounded strangely familiar…

Before Ryu could pause for thought, Zephia had pulled away from him again. She turned left at a dead-end corridor, then right at the end of another one, and Ryu had to sprint to reach her.

"Zephia, tell me what's going on, please!" he cried, stretching to try and haul her mane back with him. "We can't lose each other here!"

Zephia stopped suddenly at a crossroads, panting. She was still, listening, but this time no sound reached them. Glancing furtively along the endless, empty corridor either side of them, she called out. "Mum? Dad?"

The words made Ryu freeze. And what happened next stunned him even more. One of the voices, male but of a similar timbre to Zephia's own, replied. "Zephia…" It cracked slightly, as if pained by the effort of calling.

"Dad!" Zephia cried, almost squealing. "Where are you? Are you okay?"

"We… got lost… so tired…"

"I-It's okay! Just keep calling, I'll… I'll find you both!"

Zephia turned to Ryu, and he saw a look on her face that he'd never seen in any of her numerous forms. Joy. Happiness. It was ecstatic and, Ryu found, quite infectious.

"This is… unbelievable," he said, shaking his head. "Of all the places to find your parents…"

"But it makes so much *sense* !" Zephia said, grinning. "I never really thought that mum and dad could have been hurt, or killed, or have gone insane like the other 'mon… they're too tough and clever for that! They must have wanted to find Rayquaza like we do, found this place… but look, we can help! Once we find them… the sound was coming this way…"

She darted down another featureless corridor, and Ryu didn't argue this time. She called out again, and her father called back - no words, just a basic cry, but it worked just as well. Ryu could hear them getting closer. He felt almost as thrilled as Zephia must have, for he had observed and suffered her grumpiness for so long and so *thoroughly*, he'd assumed that was simply how she was. This had transformed her.

The calling game continued until they were led to a clearing of dirt. In front of them was a straight path, whose contents were obscured by a grey, gritty kind of mist. Another set of calls confirmed her parents were ahead.

They moved very slowly down this path, checking for any off-shooting passages. Some time passed without success, and Zephia stopped.

"Dad? Did you come down a really long, straight path? Was there a weird mist there?"

For the first time, there was no reply.

Ryu and Zephia exchanged glances. "Weird," the Zoroark muttered. "Maybe this mist is obscuring their hearing or something. If only there was a better way to search…"

Her eyes suddenly lit up. "Wait, Ryu, you can sense things with your aura! Like where other Pokémon are! Can't you?"

"I… might be able to, yeah," Ryu said hesitantly. "It's not something I've really practiced…"

"Well, you should get an idea at least?"

She's confident, he thought. *And why shouldn't I be too? We haven't run into other Pokémon here, so any aura should be easy to find.*

He smiled. "Yeah, okay. Give me a sec."

He closed his eyes and focused. His aura capabilities certainly were strong enough, but it was what he didn't sense that mattered.

The aura told him, at once, that there was *no-one* here but him and Zephia. Almost like it had been waiting to tell him. The maze of tunnels was like a huge, barren wasteland for them. The voices they had been looking for were… an illusion, somehow.

Startled, Ryu opened his eyes. It was like waking from a dream. Zephia's parents *weren't here,* of course they weren't! What had they done? How far into this labyrinth had they travelled? It had been so futile… and that was surely the point! This was a trial, everything here was part of the trial, and they'd fallen for the bait. Had they failed? No, they could still get out, he'd seen that patch of light… if they could just find it again…

"Ryu!" Zephia said, shaking him. "What are you staring at? What did you find?"

Oh, Mew, he thought. *Zephia… what will this do to you? How do I say it?*

He swallowed. "I didn't find anyone… because there's no one here. It's just us."

Zephia looked blankly at him. "My parents *are* here," she said. "I've been speaking to them. What are you talking about?"

"It's not *them* . It's just some kind of trick, an illusion. Don't you remember, this place is supposed to be testing us?"

"You take me for an idiot?" Zephia snapped. "Obviously it's testing us! That's why my parents got lost, because it was testing *them* !"

"No…" Ryu shook his head helplessly. "Think about it, Zephia. How would your parents have found Sky Pillar in the first place? Just… how? And why would they have gotten lost in this area? The exit was right in front of us, you saw it too. All we had to do was walk forwards. This place was trying to tempt us away from it, and it succeeded, but-"

"Shut up!" Zephia cried, shoving him into the narrow passage's wall. "You're wrong! They *are* here, and… I'll find them! I'll show you!"

She ran from him, further down the passage, but then the rock walls suddenly sprouted black, thorny vines. They shot out in front of her, wrapping around her limbs.

"Zephia!" Ryu cried, but as he ran to pull her out, another set of vines latched around him. The shock of it paralysed him for a brief moment, and that was long enough for the vines to squeeze so tightly that his breath almost left him. With a desperate howl he ripped his arms out of them, then used them to help his legs away.

But Zephia had escaped her vines too. She slashed furiously at everything in her path, and Ryu was forced to resort to the same tactic in pursuit. The vines they destroyed grew back almost instantly.

Then suddenly, Zephia stopped. The vines stopped. A few metres in front of them, another Zoroark was sitting on the ground, looking at them. The black tinges in Zephia's fur had greyed in his, the tip of his left ear was missing, and his mane was half its full length. His turquoise eyes glowed in just the way Zephia's did.

This made Ryu pause, too. But he reminded himself, *this isn't real, this isn't real, it's trying to trick us…* He could even see the illusion, looking closely. The image of Zephia's father flickered slightly, like sunlight reflecting off a leaf.

"Zephia," the Zoroark said. He beckoned her forwards. "It's okay, sweetie."

Zephia didn't move. Neither did Ryu behind her, or the Zoroark illusion. *She must know it's fake,* Ryu hoped. *She must be seeing it…*

Eventually, the tension became unbearable. Ryu stepped towards her and said, "Zephia, don't-"

But Zephia lunged at the Zoroark instead. The moment she did, a swarm of vines burst onto her from every angle. They were twice as thick as before, their thorns like miniature daggers, coiling and driving relentlessly into her. Her father vanished into nothingness.

Zephia bit, shook, thrashed, but the vines seemed to tighten even more in response, bringing screams out of her that Ryu had never heard before. He tried to pull off her vines, and succeeded a little, but only had a second before more sprouted from the walls to target him. He instinctively lashed out at one with his outstretched palm, and it broke in half, shrivelling and falling to the ground.

… What?

Up to now he'd been using mere strength to prise the vines apart. But a force palm - a use of aura - could break them at once. *If I generated enough aura, then maybe-*

He gasped as the vines suddenly squeezed him tighter. Ahead, Zephia's movements were slowing, much of her body barely visible against the deluge of black. What would happen if they were knocked out? Did this environment have the ability to kill them?

Ryu growled at the thought. *Just focus. But… don't rush it, like Mesprit said.*

He brought his paws together and shut his eyes, searching for every little spark of energy he'd need. He tried his best to ignore the claustrophobic pushing of vines. When he'd gathered as much aura as possible, he opened his eyes again and focused it into his paws. He saw the crackling blue-white ball in front of him grow and grow, sapping more of his energy by the second, until it reached the size of his head and he could focus no more.

"Nggghhh!" He aimed his paws at Zephia and flicked them outwards - the only movement he could manage. The ball sliced apart every vine between them. When it met Zephia, she gave a cry of shock, but the vines holding her recoiled. Ryu lunged in with aching arms and grabbed her nearest limb. She tried feebly to bat off the few remaining vines; Ryu had to wrench her out of them himself.

When she was finally free, the vines snaked back into the walls they had come from and disappeared. Once again, the two Pokémon were alone.

They'd both been cut by the thorns, but Zephia had suffered much worse. Her fur from the waist down was coloured half-red with wounds, and the leg Ryu's aura had hit wasn't functioning at all. From the ground, she turned to Ryu with such resignation and

shame written on her face that, were she not so hurt, Ryu would have hugged her.

"Can I help you up?" he asked.

He thought he saw a flicker of amusement pass across her features then. She jerked her head and croaked a "Yeah."

She tried walking on her leg but moaned with pain at once. Ryu quickly got an arm over her shoulders so she wouldn't fall.

"I can carry you on my back," he offered.

Zephia shook her head, leaning into him on her good leg. "This is fine."

They said little else until reaching the end of the long corridor Zephia had ran down. Faced with two doorways, Ryu felt a rush of panic. *I can't remember all those turns we took…*

"I know the way," Zephia said, trying to limp to the right. "C'mon."

"Are you sure?"

"Unless this place has rearranged itself, I'm sure. One of the first things I was taught; don't get lost… remember where you turned…"

She stopped moving suddenly. Her head was turned away from Ryu, but he could see her mouth tremble.

Ryu admired Zephia on survival matters, but her inner thoughts were an unknown field to him - a rather scary one. He couldn't sense her feelings at all like he could with Fen, or even Savi to a lesser extent. *She needs to hear something, though… she's distraught.*

"It's okay to be sad about these things, Zephia. I… know how much your parents mean to you. For this place to trick you like it did… it's awful. I'm so sorry."

At that, Zephia slowly straightened up again, breathing heavily.

"It *is* awful," she muttered. "That's the whole point. This place wants us to cry, to be in despair… well…"

She suddenly roared at nothing in particular, then punched the wall next to her several times, which didn't budge, making her curse.

"It's not gonna happen," she hissed. "I don't care how much of this shit we have to wade through to find Rayquaza, we will fucking wade, d'you hear me?"

"Uh-"

"Ryu, tell me that whatever happens next, you're going to suck it up and get on with it. Tell me!"

With Zephia's leaning on him, their faces were within inches of each other. Ryu was afraid to say anything but agreement. "Y-Yeah! Definitely."

She looked at him too, and sighed, lowering her head, almost deflating under his arm.

"Ryu," she said softly, "I'm only going to say this once, so listen up."

Ryu didn't know how to respond to another jolt in mood. "Okay?"

"For all the times you or Fen, or Savi, or…" She faltered. " *Whoever* . For all the times you've been kind to me, treated me well, helped me, like you just did now: thanks. I don't respond with lots of thanking and hugs and slapping paws and… all the stuff you 'mon seem to enjoy; but it does mean something. I only realised that once I ran away. I missed it."

Ryu smiled and patted her shoulder. "You've helped us through a lot. That's why we do it."

"Yeah, I know," Zephia said.

Her gaze had remained fixed to the ground throughout. Ryu frowned. "You don't have to be so closed with your emotions, y'know."

"And *you* don't have to be such an impatient, hot-headed punching fanatic. But that's the way we are. And I like it that way."

Zephia glanced at him. "I'm just telling you this in case… in case I don't get the chance to do it again. *Not* that I'm prepared to get defeated by this dungeon," she growled, sounding more like the Zephia he knew, "but… gah. I don't know why I even said it, now-"

"It's fine!" Ryu was laughing at something he never thought he would witness: Zephia being socially awkward. "Thank you for telling me. Even though I *kinda* suspected as much when you turned up at our door."

"Hmph." The corners of Zephia's mouth twitched upwards. "I am glad, in a sense, that you're the one hearing this."

"Why's that?"

"Because I know how much you hated me to start with. And I know you don't anymore. Given how I am, I find that pretty miraculous."

Hate is a strong word, Ryu thought… but on consideration, she was probably right.

"You hated me just as much, I seem to remember?"

"I definitely did. Amazing how well it worked out, really."

At that moment, turning onto a new stretch, the doorway of light finally appeared again.

"Ah, good," Zephia said. "This conversation was far too uncomfortable."

"Only for you," Ryu teased. "I was enjoying the little heart-to-heart."

"Well, it's over," she snapped. "Let's get out of here. And for the rest of this dungeon, I'm pretending this never happened."

As they reached the doorway, a translucent wall appeared, splitting the path in two. Before Ryu could turn questioningly to his teammate, a voice spoke to them - whether out loud or telepathic, it was difficult to tell.

"The path to your left takes you deeper into the fortress, where further trials await," the voice said. *"The path to your right will give you a safe exit from the fortress back to where you entered; your injuries will be healed, and any lost items will be restored. If you go left, you may not have this choice again."*

The room became silent again.

"So it's asking us… if we want to give up?" Ryu said.

Zephia grunted. "I am *so* sick of this place," she muttered, limping to the left of the barrier.

"Zephia!" Ryu exclaimed. "Don't you… shouldn't we wait at least until you can walk better?"

The Zoroark shook her head without turning around. "Staying here is dangerous. I've just got a hunch. Hunches about these things never lie."

Ryu couldn't argue with that; she was a level above him in her survival skills. *And probably always will be*, he thought resignedly.

As they stepped through the doorway, the world turned briefly to the clouds of before. But then it darkened again, an utterly pitch-darkness. Ryu couldn't even see the shiny backs of his paws.

The lack of sight brought his other senses to the fore. The area again had little scent to it, nor any sound beyond a slight wind. Yet something about it made him want to recoil. He forced himself to

calm. The ground was soft, loamy, which suggested a forest. *Forests are okay… aren't they?*

"Zephia?" His voice sounded oddly hollow.

"What?"

So she was still next to him. *Phew…* "Can you see anything?"

"Of course I… oh. It's dark." She *hmphed.* "You can't, I'm guessing."

"Nothing at all."

"Can't you do anything with your aura?"

Ryu paused. *Right! Why didn't* I *think of that…* He focused himself, willing some energy into his paws, and…

The energy just… eluded him. He opened his eyes, but there was nothing. Shaking his head, he tried once more, but the state of concentration he was used to didn't arrive. *What's happening?* he thought. *Why can't I focus?*

"Uh… Ryu?" Zephia said dimly. "Aura?"

"It's not working…"

"What?"

"I-I don't know why, but… something about this place…" Ryu didn't know how to explain.

A second later, something furry and reassuringly warm met his paw.

"I can see the exit ahead of us, I think, it's like a dark void. We need to move forwards to get there, so for now stay close to me, and don't let go of my paw." Zephia immediately gave him a little tug for emphasis. "My body hurts enough without needing to worry about you."

In an attempt to lighten the mood, and distract his senses from their strange unease, Ryu joked, "Never had you down as a romantic, Zephia."

He heard the growl of irritation at once. But then it stopped, and Zephia sighed. "Whatever stupid thing helps you stay calm-"

A sudden scream cut her off. It was deafeningly loud, so shrill that almost all of Ryu's muscles had an involuntary spasm of protest. The only ones that didn't were those in Zephia grip; as he stumbled to the floor, dragging her down, he heard her hiss with pain and curse viciously.

"Ryu, *control yourself* ! It's just a Ghost…"

It was hardly cold in the forest, but Ryu couldn't stop himself shivering. Then a cacophony of screams seemed to respond to the first, making him whimper. *Oh Mew, oh Mew…*

"Ryu… !"

"I can't fight them! You k-know that!"

He couldn't comprehend the catastrophe of this situation. He was blind, facing the thing he hated more than anything, he couldn't work his aura, and all he had was an injured 'mon who *absolutely* couldn't get any more hurt-

A strange light suddenly appeared ahead, and Ryu had barely registered it before instinctively throwing himself to the ground; this time Zephia managed to let go of him as he did.

His back rolled over a bumpy surface - *rocks!* he realised. Then he looked for the light again and saw something different; a streak of darkness, slashing through something that screamed in complaint.

Then there was a landing of feet, and a forcibly suppressed cry of pain.

"Ghost is gone," Zephia said. Then, much angrier, "How did you see it coming? Were you lying?"

"No! I-I… I only saw its attack, because it glowed a little," Ryu stammered. "Other things are still too dark."

"Hmph. I suppose that's better than nothing." Zephia found his paw again, though Ryu had to pull himself up given her little strength. "You found rocks?" she said.

"Yeah, but-"

" *No*, Ryu. I can't fight much more. You need to help me."

"But I can't throw in the dark!"

"Then I'll *tell you* where to throw, alright?"

Though she hid it well, there was an undoubtable shakiness to Zephia's voice. It gave Ryu a little more resolve not to succumb to his fear. *If Zephia's worried, this must be bad..* .

Then the hoard of screams came again. He clutched the rock in his free hand so tightly that it was a wonder it didn't crumble.

"Ghost approaching," Zephia growled. "Turn right a little. *Right*," she repeated as he shuffled the wrong way. "Good. It's coming. Throw the moment I say…"

When the air around Fen and Savi had stopped swirling, they found themselves at a water's edge. They stood a few metres from the bank, and behind them was a huge, vertical wall of grass. *That's the wrong way, then,* Fen thought.

"Oh, thank Mew," Savi groaned, collapsing onto the bank, his legs splayed out beneath him.

Fen didn't quite share his relief, but that was understandable; the last trial had hit Savi harder. He had just half-encouraged, half-dragged the 'mon through the bizarre mountain they'd landed on. Savi had found the initial altitude of it unnerving, but Fen had quickly managed to get him into a steady walk. What didn't help were the gigantic, fire-breathing Pokémon that started plummeting from the sky towards them.

Savi had found *this* even more terrifying than the height, especially since when the Charizard and Talonflame weren't firing flamethrowers at them, they were reaching down with their claws and trying to pluck them both into the air. Fen had the idea of picking Savi up and running across the mountain alone, but the creatures had immediately converged on him when he tried.

They couldn't prevent him holding one of the Ivysaur's vines by his side, so Fen used that to help Savi through the first leg of the journey. The mountain flattened past this peak, but its walkways became increasingly narrow and its rocks unstable. Fen needed almost all his concentration not to lose balance himself and fall to the ground far, far below. Savi was less likely to fall due to his vines' dexterity, but his fear of the height and unceasing attacks from the Fire 'mon made them move very slowly. And painfully.

Still, they had inched their way to the door of light awaiting at the end of the mountain. Or rather, the door which took them 'deeper', rather than back to Sky Pillar. *But where are we now?*

Fen looked at their new surroundings again. A huge lake loomed in front of them, its water an icy blue. He realised with alarm that there was essentially nothing else around; dense mist shrouded the left and right of the bank, which sent a clear message of ' *don't go this way'* . He assumed the lake ended somewhere ahead of them, but there was nothing on the horizon. Their bank arced inwards to the water from all angles; it was unavoidable.

Savi suddenly yelped next to him, jumping to his feet.

"What's wrong?" Fen asked.

"The ground just… gave me a shock. It really hurt…" Savi seemed to shiver slightly in his anxiety.

"I think this place might not want us to rest," Fen guessed.

"That's nice of it," Savi grumbled.

Fen glanced back to the lake, and Savi's eyes followed him. "Is this what we have to do next?"

"If it is, I don't understand *what* we do," Fen said. "There's no way I'm going inside that."

It might've been different if he knew that these artificial environments couldn't really hurt them - if he was merely being challenged to walk into the lake, say. But that was the terrifying thing - they *could* hurt. Savi still had burns all over his scales from the Fire Pokémon, emphasising their patchy colour even more, while his own fur was marked from where the 'mon's talons had come raking down on him. They hadn't needed to find out if the environments could go as far as kill them; Fen hoped it would stay that way.

"There's something down there," Savi said, paw pointing at a dark object on a corner of the bank. Fen had missed it. They carefully walked around the bank until he was close enough to recognise it. Then his stomach clenched ever tighter than before.

It was made of a dull wood, horribly thin and narrow, and with two double-bladed paddles of the same material. A long indent in its centre was the only seating. A canoe. The flimsiest one he'd ever seen.

We're using this to cross, Fen thought despairingly. *We're using a canoe.*

It had to be. All that was here for them was the lake and the boat.

He had done a brief bit of canoeing in his school years. He seemed to remember he and his partner's boat capsizing several times, and he hadn't gone near the things since. At least he had an idea of how they worked. *But if I didn't, knowing what this dungeon is like, we'd probably be given some equally horrific way of crossing…*

He glanced at Savi, who looked bewildered. "Have you seen one of these before?" Fen asked.

Savi hesitated, as if he desperately wanted to give a reassuring answer, but eventually shook his head.

Of course he has no conception of boats, Fen fumed silently. So not only was this place forcing him to cross the one thing he truly felt terrified of, but he'd have to *teach* someone to help him do it. What sick, twisted reality had Rayquaza created here?

He sighed. *There's no escaping it now.*

"So, Savi. This is a canoe, and you sit on it, and… well, it's how we're getting from one side of this lake to the other." He picked up one of the paddles to mime his instructions. "We push these backwards through the water to move. We'll both take one, and our actions need to be synchronised, otherwise it won't work very well. To go straight ahead, we just paddle left, right, left, right, so you don't get pulled in either direction… make sense?"

"I… think so," Savi said.

"Good. To go left, we just paddle on the left side, not the right. The opposite would apply for going right. To slow down…" He frowned. *How do you slow down?* "Just… stop… paddling? The lake seems still, so we should be okay on that for now."

Savi was clearly listening intently, but the way he still looked at the canoe made Fen doubt how much he'd understood. *Not like I could have expected too much… but what else can I say?* He racked his brains.

"Oh, one of us will sit in the front end and one in the back. So… I suppose-"

"You want me to take the front," Savi said. "Because if anything jump out of the water, I'll have an advantage in fighting it off. And… it means you could check I'm doing all of those things correctly?"

"That was my thinking," Fen said, gaining a miniscule feeling of reassurance. He noticed Savi was holding a paddle tentatively with his vines. "Do you think you could move the paddle with just your paws?"

Savi rested on his back legs to pick it up. The sight of him sitting so unusually was surprisingly amusing. "I think so," he said, doing a few test paddles. "Keeps my vines free for attacking, you think?"

"Yeah." Fen nodded. "Good. Just keep hold of the paddle at all times."

With nothing else to add, they squeezed into the canoe, took hold of their paddles, and Fen pushed them firmly away from the bank. The boat rocked a little, but no water crept inside.

"Now we paddle?" Savi asked in front of him.

Fen released the breath he'd been holding in. He now realised another good reason for positioning Savi at the front; the Ivysaur's bud looked like a very nice thing to grab onto if he got the urge. Or if his *current* urge managed to intensify any more.

"Yep," he said quietly. "Let's take it slow. Left… right… left…"

They managed to at least move forwards in a wobbly straight line, but that came at the inevitable side effect of speed. The boat drifted along unbearably slowly. Nothing new appeared on the horizon; Fen wouldn't have been surprised if their goal was moving *away* from them. Then he glanced behind him, and found their own bank left far behind too. It might as well have disappeared.

Suddenly, the boat was unsteady; balanced, but rocking slightly. Fen looked around in a panic. The lake had mysteriously picked up waves, and they were only small, but it was enough to increase their speed.

They hadn't veered off track yet, though. "Keep paddling!" he barked at Savi, who had stopped to check the water. Then he almost reconsidered. *Paddling when it's choppy? But… the faster we can get to the end, the less suffering we'll endure… maybe? Mew, I shouldn't be having to consider these things!*

Savi was still staring at the lake, his paddle unmoved. "Something's in the water," he said, before Fen could prod him again.

At that, Fen became so stiff with fear that even if he'd wanted to pedal, the simple movement would have been difficult. Their boat surely stood little chance against anything tougher than Magikarp. "C-can you see it?"

"Hardly." Savi leant over the side of the boat, just enough for it to stay steady. It was obvious why he couldn't see; the constant little waves pushing them onwards were turning the water's surface to white froth.

Neither of them moved for a moment. Then there was an explosion from the opposite side to Savi's gaze. A Sharpedo launched itself at the Ivysaur, its whole body engulfed with water. For an impossible second it landed on the boat itself. Savi clawed instinctively at the Sharpedo then barraged it with close range leaves, which was enough to knock the Water 'mon back into the lake.

Fen's fear of being attacked was then overridden by an even greater one, as the canoe was sent from a rocking to a lurch. He grabbed both sides of the boat desperately, as if his strength could somehow overrule physics.

Suddenly the Sharpedo reappeared, flying straight towards his face. Fen threw himself to the floor, which stung him with the surface

water that had appeared. He heard a crash of waves as the Sharpedo went over him. Then a ripping of wood, and the boat swung violently sideways.

It seemed a miracle that they managed not only to stay in the boat, but that the whole thing didn't capsize. Once the boat felt stable enough for him to lift his head off the deck, he saw a major chunk of one of the canoe's raised sides was missing. He could feel the boat starting to lean already. He went to paddle, but there was nothing in his hands. He scrabbled around desperately, but the boat was too small to hide a paddle. *The Sharpedo must've thrown it out of my grip…*

"Savi, paddle!" he yelled. The Ivysaur was still scanning the water, paddle limp in his paws.

"W-where?" he replied, looking back.

The answer was so confusing, and sounded so confused, that Fen hesitated. "Away from the Sharpedo?"

"But the lake…" Savi's words made Fen look up, and he froze. He realised now why they hadn't seen an end to the lake; the water led below them. Rather than a waterfall, the lake ahead tilted downwards improbably steeply, and rocks twice the size of their tiny vessel jutted out from the roaring white waves.

The Sharpedo, wherever it was, wasn't a concern anymore. *It was intended to merely hinder us,* Fen thought despairingly. *To prevent us being prepared for this…*

The rift in their canoe had made them drift left. If they kept on that direction they were headed for a particularly jagged rock, its edges like a set of sharpened claws. *And at the speed we'll be going, with this tiny wooden boat…*

Savi was just staring at the rock. *What is he doing? Has he already forgotten how to steer?*

"Savi, give me the paddle!" Fen ordered. Thankfully, Savi obeyed without argument. But before Fen could start paddling, they reached the end of the lake's flats.

On the downhill slope, the wind started howling in Fen's ears as they rapidly gained speed. He pushed left as fast as he could; they didn't need to worry about balanced paddling anymore.

Or so he thought. Their boat slid past the rock sideways, the edge closest to Fen just scraping the surface. Then it kept turning. Fen tried steering the other way, but soon the canoe swung so he was facing backwards. All he could see were the perilous waves behind them, and his arms froze up again. He couldn't risk a glance in front, given how unsteady the canoe already was.

Still they kept spinning. Fen knew the boat was beyond any control now. Eventually it spun back to where he'd started and there, right ahead of them, was a new rock, so enormous that it seemed to swallow up the rest of the lake with it. They weren't steering away from this one.

"We need to jump," Savi murmured, turning to Fen. "Jump, Fen. Can you do that?"

Fen just blinked at him, and the 'mon shook his shoulders desperately.

"Fen! If you fly into that at this speed, you're dead! We have to avoid it!"

Savi's command had seemed so foolish, so far against every fibre of his body that Fen had instinctively dismissed it. But now he realised their position, and that Savi was right. "W-what do I do?" he asked, unable to think himself.

"Hold onto me," Savi said, though his voice was shaking almost as much. He glanced at the paddle, putting one paw on it. "We can use this to float."

"When do we jump?"

Savi didn't answer, but just glanced back at the approaching rock, seconds away from them. Its front was covered with a thousand tiny spikes. The boat would be impaled.

"Ready?" he said, though of course Fen wasn't. He just nodded limply.

"Now!"

They couldn't have jumped more than two or three feet above the ground, but the descent lasted for an eternity. Fen couldn't stop himself screaming.

It froze in his mouth the moment they hit water. It was so freezing, the stinging pain it hammered into every inch of him so absolute, so suffocating, that his mind seemed unable to comprehend anything more.

Then an unseen force yanked him upwards, and his head flew out of the waves, making him gasp for air, while the half of him underwater continued to thrash around.

He was hit across the face so ferociously that it cut through all his agony, making him stop momentarily. Strangely, he didn't sink. He heard Savi's voice, and a moment later found the Ivysaur's face right next him. The 'mon's front legs still held their paddle.

"Stay still, Fen!" Savi was screaming at him. "I can't hold you like this! Stay *still* !"

Savi's vines were what had pulled him up, Fen realised. He understood Savi's words, but staying still… his body couldn't comprehend it. The water was a burning, writhing itch on his fur, and he was doing all he could to shake it off. If he stayed still… well, this was already the worst pain he'd known…

"C-can't," he managed, spewing a mouthful of water through opening his mouth. "The pain…"

"I know it's bad! But this water's not gonna go away by thrashing! Stay still, and hold onto the paddle. Please. Then I can let go of you and steer."

Fen tried to follow his orders, but almost immediately it was too much to bear, and he wriggled-

Slap. This one hit his eye and stung even more. Savi looked at him, so apologetic yet also so scared… though Fen felt the very same, it gave him the courage to try again.

He focused all his efforts on staying still, even though the pain made his eyes overflow with tears. Then he moved his arms forwards, crying out with the effort, and somehow fixed them around the paddle.

"Okay… good," Savi said. "I'm gonna let go of you now."

As Fen looked ahead of them for the first time, he realised why Savi had been so desperate to get him secure. They still had a perilous stretch of lake to negotiate; another rock was heading in their direction.

Savi fastened his vines onto the edge of their paddle, then leant away from it and started swimming. His legs were a frantic blur of green in the water. But for all Savi's efforts, trying to move a 'mon of his weight and a chunk of wood, all against the strongest of tides, appeared beyond him. The rock still approached fast.

Eventually Savi stopped, panting. "I… I don't know what to do," he gasped.

Even if Fen had known what to say, the words would have been ripped out of his mouth. For a wave ahead parted to reveal another rock, small but spiky, mere metres from them. From Fen's position,

holding the middle of the paddle, he would be crushed. Savi was safe on the right side, but moving there might push them both off the paddle, so…

With a burst of energy that he didn't know he had, he threw himself left, grabbing the other end of the paddle. He escaped the rock by inches, the waves it threw up blinded him, then he heard a feeble *crack,* like a twig being snapped underfoot. He floated for a moment, but nothing hit him. He opened his eyes and looked for Savi. And he found the 'mon. But they were several metres apart.

Fen looked down at the broken half-paddle in his hands, horrified. *I'm stranded on this thing. If another rock comes near… I can't swim! I can't do anything! I'm dead!*

It was as if the lake heard those thoughts. For when he looked up once more, there were no rocks, and finally an end to the water was in sight in the form of a sandy shore. But the tide was stronger than ever. It pushed him forwards, submerging him, brought him back to the surface just long enough for him to breathe, then pushed him under again. Over and over and over.

That time until reaching the shore blurred in his mind. He felt Savi drag him forwards until they were beyond spitting distance of the waves. The numbness that had set into his bones started to recede, but with that came the coldness he despised so much. As he shivered, he reached behind him for his tail, feeling its tiny, most comforting of flames, and hugged it to his chest…

… until his back suddenly seized up, making him yelp. There was a simultaneous noise beside him. Savi, who had collapsed too, was on his feet again.

"We're safe," he said, then sighed. "It's just what you said earlier… we *still* can't rest." He offered a vine up to Fen, who accepted it shakily. "How're you feeling?"

Getting up made Fen aware of the sand that had stuck to his entire backside of fur. Wet sand was bad enough when he'd only had skin to worry about; he'd never wanted to scratch himself as badly as now. He wondered if it was possible to feel any more uncomfortable than this.

"Fine," he lied, and Savi must have known it too, but he didn't know what else to say. *'Alive?'*

He and Savi glanced up the shore. Another white door loomed ahead; the first Fen had noticed of it. He'd almost forgotten that all of this was *only* a trial. *And… we must have passed it. Somehow…?!*

"Sorry to hit you so hard," Savi murmured, as they shuffled towards it. "I didn't know any other way to get you to be still."

Fen hadn't even considered it; the whole experience on the lake had been swept into a black hole of *badness* within his memories. He felt bruising around the eye Savi hit, hurting at the touch. Maybe it would give him a black eye. *If I were a human, people would think I'd been in a fight.* The inane thought cheered him up a little.

"You have nothing to apologise for," he reassured Savi. "I was the useless one. Everything you did there was perfect. Fighting the Sharpedo, telling me to jump, holding me still, dragging me up shore…"

"Don't forget my paddling skills," Savi added. They exchanged a weary smile at that.

When they reached the doorway, it said, *"The path to your left takes you deeper into the fortress, where further trials await. The path to your right will give you a safe exit from the fortress back to where you entered-"*

"This again?" Savi muttered, almost in disbelief. He took a step left, then shot Fen a hopeful glance.

Fen shouldn't have hesitated. He had no desire to turn back. But as he nodded to Savi and followed him through the light, he found himself pleading with this strange place for some mercy. Surely, *surely* things couldn't get much worse…

The Dungeon: Part 2

Fen woke with a start. He blinked. The floor, which his stomach lay against, felt flat and grassy.

… Huh?

He'd never fallen asleep. All they had done was enter the next trial! What… what had just happened?

As he moved to stand, his gaze froze on his hand. Then his arm. They were too small, and too light. He felt for his tail behind him. It was gone.

He spun over and looked at himself. It felt like déjà vu. For the second time, he was unexpectedly in a Chimchar's body. At least it seemed unhurt.

He looked around furtively. The dungeon had placed him in what appeared to be a crop field. Either side and behind him towered unassailably dense stacks of green, which were completely still; there was no wind. The only feasible path lay ahead of him.

But no-one's here…? He felt like he knew so immediately, for the area was eerily quiet. But he still called out, "Savi? Ryu? Zephia?"

It was quickly swallowed up by the crops. But then he heard a rustle of grass, and his heart lifted… only for a second. A purple head came poking from the green a few metres away, and when its eyes found him the 'mon jumped out. Two fangs protruded from its bared mouth, which dripped with angry saliva, and a spike on its forehead glistened slightly. Its size threw Fen off for a moment, before he remembered that he was just as small now.

A Nidoran. Definitely a wild one.

"KWAAA!" it cried, the shrillness almost making Fen wince. Instinctively he began gathering fire into his throat, anticipating a charge forward from the 'mon.

He was correct. Yet as the Nidoran moved, he had a jolt of shock. No fire came to him, not even a wisp. The action was so automatic that he didn't know how to respond to it failing. He was frozen. The Nidoran's legs reared up and kicked him to the floor, then kicked dirt into his face as he fell for good measure.

Fen shook his head frantically to clear his vision, but the Nidoran wasn't hesitating. He heard it cry out and somehow yanked his arm away before the 'mon could bite down on it, escaping with only a little torn fur. He scrambled backwards on all fours, then got into a crouch, feeling vegetation push against him. He was on the edge of the cropped path, and the Nidoran still stood in front of him, unhurt.

He had to slow the Nidoran down. Waiting for it to attack again wasn't a good idea. But without fire, and without the punching capabilities his evolved form had… he would have to scratch. *It's still something. And I* know *I still have claws.*

He lunged forwards, contracting both sets on his hands, and swiped. But this didn't go to plan either. His first hand's claws connected with the side of the Nidoran's face, but barely left an impression. His second swipe was even weaker, almost missing the 'mon entirely before brushing harmlessly off.

The Nidoran snapped at him again, which he rolled away from, and he managed to land a better scratch on its side, bringing an angry cry from it. But then it suddenly swivelled, driving its forehead spike into Fen's chest. The impact hurt, but even worse was the grimy sensation it sent into his body, almost making him retch.

He could tell his opponent was struggling too now, but it looked ready to fight to the death. Fen crawled backwards and felt the high crops again. He had nowhere to go, and no other attacks. The Nidoran bared its fangs once again… and as its back legs twitched

to jump, he turned and dove blindly into the crops, out of desperation.

The thick plants hit him from all angles as he fell. It was to his enormous relief that they weren't spiked, but they were so tightly packed that he could hardly see a thing. The clearing of their fight was like a distant beacon.

The Nidoran didn't follow him immediately, but he soon heard a rustling and sniffing. One of its red eyes flashed in what little light existed, and Fen quickly shuffled back further into the crops, into greater darkness. The Nidoran didn't spot him.

It was much colder here, and Fen's hands automatically drifted towards his tail flame to warm him.

My tail! He almost gasped, suppressing the noise at the last second. *How can the Nidoran not see me? I must be lighting this area up!*

There seemed only one explanation; one that also explained how he could make out the 'mon's face without being spotted. *Its eyesight is worse than mine…*

Suddenly, he had an advantage. By sneaking around the crops, he could surprise the Nidoran, catch it on its blind side. *But even if I can… what do I do? I can't use fire, can't scratch, can't punch… I could tackle it? But a Nidoran is probably stronger than me. Maybe I could pin it down for a second, but…*

He heard a faint sizzling from behind him, then cursed his hesitation. His tail was burning the crops. The Nidoran might not be able to see him, but it would surely sniff out smoke. He needed to act fast, and somehow devise a plan in that time.

As he thought about his tail again, an idea came to him. It felt as ingenious as it was insane. But he had to try.

He crept as silently as possible until he could see the Nidoran's spikes near its rear. It edged forwards, perhaps after the smoke, but didn't notice him. Then, as his foot took a final step across, it met a divot and he briefly lost balance, putting a hand down to stabilise.

It mattered little; the Nidoran heard the crops move and saw him at last. It burst forwards at once. Without thinking, Fen picked up a handful of dirt in his lowered hand and hurled it into the Nidoran's stride. It skidded back, blinded, and he used that hesitation to tackle it, jamming his claws into its sides so it couldn't escape. The 'mon still managed to bite his leg as they tumbled, but once they were still, and he had a hold on top of it, he twisted his body and shoved his tailbone into the Nidoran's face. It screamed and tried to writhe away from the flames, but Fen held onto the 'mon for as long as he could, before turning over again and getting on top of it to prevent escape. He slashed at its flailing limbs, over and over, making his arms burn with fatigue.

But it worked. With a final weak cry, the Nidoran's eyes drooped shut. Then, with a puff of white mist, its body disappeared.

For some reason, this didn't come as a massive shock to him. There wasn't time to deliberate anyway; the crops would burn if he didn't get back into the open. Once he'd crawled away from them, he sat down and took a moment to rest and think.

This trial is about more than just isolation, reducing me to my lowest evolution. I've never felt this weak before. Even before I knew *how to fight, I could breathe a little fire, and my claws…* He looked at them. *They're shorter and blunter than they ever were.*

It was difficult not to feel scared about what this trial awaited. All he'd had to fight was a little Nidoran, and he'd barely defeated it, with a mixture of luck and improvisation. What if he was given something far stronger? There wasn't a shortage of 'mon to fill that role.

No; Rayquaza wouldn't make a trial that's impossible to pass. At least, I hope…

He carefully got to his feet and started down the path. Nothing jumped out at him along the way. When the crops cleared, he found himself in a large clearing. Just in front of him a stream ran horizontally across, and a few stepping stones presented a path. In the centre of the clearing was a single, enormous tree; its vast web of branches seemed to dwarf the rest of the area.

Still nothing appeared, so Fen navigated the stones. Nothing jumped out here, either. Only when he landed back on the grass did he hear a rustling from ahead. A tall, blue figure suddenly fell from a high branch of the tree and landed in front of him. Fen had to do a double take.

"Ryu?!" he exclaimed.

"Heya!" the Lucario waved at him. "How're ya finding the trial so far?"

Fen's expression hardened at once. The Lucario acted, sounded and spoke exactly as Ryu did, but it evidently wasn't him. *The dungeon wants to play these games, now…*

"What's the meaning of this?" he said.

"Of what? You'll have to be a bit more specific, 'mon. If you mean *this place*, well, it's where we need to meet Rayquaza, isn't it?"

"You know that's not what I mean."

Ryu chuckled - it still *felt* like Ryu to his mind, much as he wanted to resent this creature. "Acting serious, I see. Well, you got past the Nidoran. That was like a little warm-up. This next challenge will be tougher. You'll have to fight another 'mon - one you're slightly more familiar with."

"You," Fen guessed.

"Noooo! How pitiful would that be? Your no-fire and tiny claws versus… *this* ?" The Lucario gestured to himself, beaming

continuously. Fen couldn't help getting angered by it, *knowing* that that reaction was surely what the dungeon wanted.

"All will be revealed in a moment," Ryu went on. "What's important is that you won't be allowed to continue unless you win this fight. By *win,* I mean knocking out your opponent, making them evaporate. There's no hidden door in this field; it'll only appear once - or *if*, I should say - you succeed. Got that?"

Fen nodded silently.

"Good," Ryu said. He whistled, and a figure walked out from the tree behind him. Fen had to work hard not to flinch at the sight.

It was Cubbs. Somehow, the sight of the Cubone was much harder to take than Ryu. Perhaps because the sight was *so* unmistakable; he wore the same dented, slightly too-small helmet of bone that he'd always had, and in one hand held a thin, foot-length bone that Fen had given to him in what felt like - and what really *was* - only a matter of weeks ago. He remembered how Cubbs, who was usually level-headed, often more so than him, had gone mad with excitement once that bone was in his hand. It had cost him a fortune, even with his part-time job, but the reaction had it made it instantly worthwhile.

And perhaps it hurt because Fen had tried to cast those agonising memories away, to focus on their journey to Rayquaza. Yet right now he almost wished that this dungeon, whatever it was, could be truly *real*, if just for a moment.

"How're ya doing, bud?" Ryu asked Cubbs. He just turned to Fen and cried aggressively. Though it was muffled, as always, by the helmet obscuring his mouth.

"Oh!" Ryu said. "I forgot he doesn't speak." His grin returned. "Sadly, that's all I'm here for. Wish I could watch the fight. Oh, two final things. Firstly, I know how you like rain, so…"

Ryu looked up, and in a moment the sky had dimmed and there was a familiar stinging on Fen's fur. The rain wasn't as heavy as some of the storms they'd been caught in recently, which gave him a little hope that this wasn't being made *impossible* . Though it mostly just stirred the instinctual discomfort he couldn't help.

"And secondly," Ryu continued, "don't get too close to the river, okay? Bye!"

He disappeared, just as the Nidoran had, in a puff of smoke.

Fen glanced backwards at his words, and realised at once; the stepping stones he'd crossed from had vanished. The river was far too wide to cross by any other means.

When he turned back, he felt foolish for even looking. Cubbs was already upon him, his bone hand raised. The rain didn't seem to affect the Cubone's movement at all. *There's a good chance that it* isn't *affecting him, knowing this place…*

Fen feinted to move towards the bone before springing the opposite way. He got a scratch on the Cubone's chest, but a second later the bone struck his side, hard. He lost balance and fell.

He didn't expect the bone to hurt so much; as he got up his injured side screamed with pain. Crouching lessened it, but even that movement required a gritting of teeth. Nor did he expect his own scratch to do so *little* - it didn't leave a mark on Cubbs' thick hide.

Cubbs swung again. And again. All Fen could do was back away. Another full hit would floor him. Just as against the Nidoran, the dungeon seemed to be telling him, *'You're against an opponent stronger than you, and there's no way to escape - find a way to win.'*

To stand any chance*,* he'd have to stop this phase of attacks. But how? Not by shuffling backwards. Was there anything around them that could help?

He risked taking his eyes off Cubbs for a second and was almost punished; he arched his chest away from the 'mon's bone by inches. But he'd seen enough.

The big tree. Cubbs can't climb, but I can, or at least always have done. I can figure something out once I get there…

Cubbs was fast with a bone, but Fen fancied himself to win to footrace. He considered trying to edge sideways around the Cubone's attacks to give him a better angle to run at, but then his foot slipped; the grass he anticipated behind him wasn't there. It brushed water.

The river!

Falling in would defeat him too, and it would hurt far more than the bone. Panic took over, and he lunged straight forwards. The movement was so instinctive and sudden that the Cubone was for once off-guard. They both hit the ground in a heap, before Fen scrambled up and towards the tree.

A momentary glance confirmed his hopes; despite the pain in his side, Cubbs wouldn't catch him on foot. *But what could I actually* do *there?* He doubted that Cubbs would try climbing at all, since staying close to the ground was part of the 'mon's nature. At the very least, it would be a chance to rest. Perhaps something was hidden in the tree that could help him. The dungeon seemed to enjoy things like that-

Cubbs cried out, and he turned his head at the worst possible time. The bone barely resembled a bone; it was a spinning, dipping missile. When it cracked against his forehead, he blacked out for a second. Only the sound of Cubbs' little footsteps approaching, like sirens to his senses, demanded he rise again.

The tree was almost in front of him. Despite his swimming vision, and every muscle protesting, he forced his way to the trunk, and started climbing. At one point he heard - and *felt* - Cubbs' bone strike

a place his leg had rested moments before. *I'm not even safe up here* .

He climbed around to the other side of the great trunk, buying him a few seconds as Cubbs had to move likewise. Then he saw a most welcome sight; a hollowed area in the trunk, just tall and deep enough for his body to fit inside. He got in and pushed himself against its side, panting. He saw Cubbs' bone appear twice in the air, both times narrowly evading his hollow. After that it didn't arrive again. Perhaps the Cubone was resting too.

He had to hurt Cubbs somehow… but without fire, he felt at a loss. Quick scratches wouldn't do a thing against him. And his tail didn't count, for there was no chance he could pin the Cubone down like the Nidoran. As long as Cubbs had his bone, he was not only protected, but could hit Fen at virtually any time.

That damn bone, he thought, exasperated. *How can I fight it?*

There was a sudden *thump,* and a handhold of inner bark he'd been gripping suddenly broke off in his hand. A few pieces of his hiding place fell away. Soon, this place wouldn't be protected either.

He looked at the broken bark. The way it fit his grip reminded him of how Cubbs held his bone.

That's it! I know I'm faster than Cubbs - the best way to counter his bone is to use one myself! Well, it doesn't have to be a bone, but…

The feeble piece of wood in his hand wouldn't do. He needed a branch. Thick enough not to break, yet small enough to be wieldy.

He poked his head out of the gap and looked around intensely, desperately. His eyes found a suitable looking branch just as Cubbs' bone whistled past his face, then he retreated again. It was a long jump down, but he'd spent enough time in trees to be confident. That was what he told himself.

He poked his body out again, and pretended to look around, really concentrating solely on Cubbs in his periphery. The moment the Cubone threw its weapon, Fen leapt out towards his branch. He caught it near the edge with both hands, his legs dangling a metre from the ground. The branch sagged a little but didn't crack.

Giving the branch a brief tug confirmed that it wasn't moving. *Time for plan B, then.* As he moved to pull his legs up, he heard the whistle of bone again. He'd landed the wrong side of Cubbs to see it, but he heard the *crack* against his leg, and couldn't help squealing. His leg was shot with so much sudden agony that he felt sure something had broken.

With another cry of effort, Fen lifted his legs onto the branch, then turned onto his back, letting his flame sear the wood below. Though it caught quickly, it would need time to burn through. Craning his neck, he saw Cubbs retrieve his bone yet again, prepare yet another throw…

Fen couldn't wait any longer. He punched and kicked down with his one good leg at the branch. It swayed for a split second, upon which he saw the bone leave Cubbs' hand, then it fell.

He landed just about on all-fours; his leg felt better than he feared it would. He snatched up the short end of the severed branch and raised it at Cubbs. It felt pleasingly tough, though a little heavier than he wanted. The Cubone didn't move for a second, his eyes surprised.

He's without his bone, Fen realised. But before he could figure out how to attack, Cubbs dived headfirst into him. With a helmet as hard as his weapon, it was a formidable attack. Fen fell, but Cubbs ran straight past him. It was both relieving and gut-wrenching for Fen to know why. Cubbs loved his bone too much. He'd forfeit a fight in a heartbeat, if it meant not having to lose it.

When Cubbs had retrieved it, they finally faced each other. They approached slowly, weapons raised, as if acting out an ancient duel.

Then on a sudden impulse, Fen made his grip on his branch two-handed, and swung across the Cubone.

Cubbs' weapon blocked his with a *thud* . The impact of thin bone on thick wood was evenly matched; both of them were driven back a step. The Cubone responded with his own attack, and though Fen raised his branch to block, the bone's force was stronger than he expected. The vibrations it sent through his hands almost made them drop the stick. Cubbs lashed again while he reeled, striking his other leg, the only one that had been good to stand on. Fen tottered, just trying to stay upright, but Cubbs simply struck him to the ground.

Fen didn't try getting up. His ears were ringing from so much pain. Even if he did go on, what could he do? He was truly out of ideas now. Every hit of Cubbs' bone hurt more than the last. Despite all his efforts, the Cubone - *his* Cubone - had bested him.

In the corner of his vision, he noticed things change. It began with the blue sky; its colour faded like it were turning to greyscale. This quickly spread to the trees, the grass, even the sun. The sky flickered, then started becoming transparent. His other senses started losing their grip; he couldn't feel the grass brush underneath him, hear the faint breeze of wind, smell… that smell of-

"Wait!" he cried. He suddenly found strength in his legs, enough to scramble upright again. He looked around; the environment seemed to have come back, unchanged. Cubbs was still standing opposite, eyeing him suspiciously.

The dungeon had been about to kick him out, Fen thought. He was certain of it. *As if I was ready to admit defeat… what am I thinking?! Defeat isn't an option here! I have to get through, whatever it takes…*

As he looked at Cubbs, he had an awful realisation. He'd been holding back without knowing it. He *could* have been given far stronger Pokémon to fight than Cubbs, but that wasn't the point. He had known the Cubone's biggest weakness all along yet had shied

away from it, because it was *Cubbs!* Not anymore. He didn't have a choice.

His tail had responded, too; he felt it burn with a ferocity he couldn't remember it ever having before he'd evolved. It gave him another idea, which he felt stupid not for trying sooner. He picked his branch up and held the edge in front of his flames. It was set alight instantly.

At the sight of his new weapon, Cubbs made a growl of discontent and shuffled backwards a little, bone raised in defence. *He's intimidated; good* . *Now for the tricky part…*

He lunged not towards Cubbs' body but to his bone-wielding hand, shoving his fire-branch into where the 'mon's fingers held onto it. Cubbs squealed and tried to move away, but Fen whacked his hand with the stick as he did. The bone fell.

As Fen reached for the bone, Cubbs did too with his good arm. Both caught it, and for a moment they just stared at each other. Fen could see the panic in Cubbs' wide eyes. *Don't do this,* the Cubone was saying. *Don't take this from me.*

Fen paused… and regretted it.

Cubbs threw his head into Fen's other arm, holding the flaming stick, and it went flying into the air. Cubbs made a sudden yank for his bone, but Fen held on. He brought his now-free arm onto it for support. In response, Cubbs did the same. Four limbs had a hold on the weapon.

But neither had a straightforward strength advantage. They collapsed to their knees in their efforts. Fen could feel his grip start to wane, but it *couldn't* . Desperate, he leant forwards and bit down on Cubbs' strong hand, then shook his head around like he'd seen Zephia do, to cause as much pain as possible. As Cubbs cried out, his bitten hand came loose from the bone. He started hitting his armoured head against Fen's unprotected equal.

Fen took one hand off the bone and quickly reached up, claws out, towards Cubbs' skull, to the one part of it without protection. The eyes.

As soon as he slashed it, Cubbs let go of the bone. He whined and sobbed with pain, pushing his hand under the helmet to cover his hurt eye. His other hand lay limply on the ground, still bloody from Fen's bites.

Despite his agony, Fen saw a very different set of emotions in the 'mon's unhurt eye. The despair was obvious; without a bone, Cubbs had no desire to fight. A bone wielded by a Cubone was more precious to them than anything. Yet the eye had anger and hatred too, and there was only one thing that could be aimed at.

Stop this! Fen told himself, shaking his head. *He's not real!*

He thought back to the fake Ryu's words. *I won't have won until Cubbs is knocked out. Until… he evaporates.*

The last word stuck in his mind. This Cubbs might not be real… might even hate him… but he'd never get closer to seeing the real Cubone again. Fen looked at him and briefly tried to cherish the sight; tried to ignore the injuries he'd inflicted, the look in his eyes…

Forgive me, Cubbs.

He raised the Cubone's weapon against him; it seemed the most painless, efficient way of doing this. Then he cracked the bone against Cubbs' body. Cubbs cried with pain and rolled onto his side.

He hit him again. Cubbs cried even louder and retreated into a ball, unable to look at him. Fen couldn't look either. He closed his eyes, tried to block out the noise, but it wouldn't work. He hit Cubbs again and again and again, desperate to end this torture for them both.

Eventually, Cubbs' crying died into a whimper. Then he went silent. Fen resisted the urge to look at him a final time, knowing the sight

would upset him even more. He heard the *puff* sound of the Cubone disappearing, feeling the bone in his hand do the same. Another doorway of light appeared ahead of him.

"You have completed the final trial," the voice said. *"The path to your left leads to the true location of Rayquaza's fortress. The path to your right gives you a safe exit from where you entered. Either path will heal your injuries, repair any other hindrances, and restore to you any lost items."*

There was some relief at the words, but they barely registered. Even his battered body and the stinging of rain seemed to have gone numb under a cloud of sadness.

He was never more grateful then for the dungeon's jolt of electricity telling him to move. Adrenaline sparked back into his limbs, and his mind cleared a little.

That… that wasn't Cubbs, he thought determinedly. *It was a cruel imitation, nothing more. The real Cubbs will always be with me… in my thoughts.* He looked at the door and stomped down the left path, unwilling to waste a moment more. *And I'm gonna do you proud, buddy.*

"Fen!"

The brightness of the new location dazzled him. He was still blinking his eyes into focus when there came a dull thudding of pawsteps and an unmistakable voice.

"Wait, Ryu!" Zephia's voice cried.

The pawsteps stopped, as Fen's vision finally cleared. Ryu, leaning forwards, turned to Zephia behind him. "What?"

"Well… don't make him fall backwards. These clouds have an *end* somewhere…"

At first, Fen hesitated. He'd already met one fake Ryu and had fallen for that, if only briefly. What if the dungeon was trying to take advantage of his willingness to believe again? Perhaps it had lied to him about the trials being over?

But several things quickly convinced him otherwise. He checked his body, and it was the one he was used to. The constant presence of fire churning in his stomach was the most welcome feeling in the world. Physically, he felt almost perfect; the only issue was that his fur, strangely, remained as damp as before.

Yet the weather made that a small issue. It was beautiful. Sunny and still, the only clouds in the sky being… the ones they were standing on. As before, though they *looked* like clouds they made a perfectly uniform platform, and felt both very solid and a little springy. Behind him was a wide, vertical wall of them. It looked just as sturdy, but he appreciated Zephia's caution.

And they were all there, Ryu, Zephia, Savi, all unhurt. The sight overwhelmed him for a moment; he hadn't realised how dearly he'd missed them. This meant all of them had come through their trials too, presumably with similar challenges to his own. It made him feel a strange kind of pride for their little team.

Something else caught his eye though, beyond all of this. He wanted to call it a gate, but to use such a normal word felt an injustice to its majesty. It towered impossibly high and wide. Rather than having columns of slats to prevent one from sneaking through, the barrier was one continuous, winding, snaking form. It finally stopped at the gate's centre, a circle that the pattern had avoided. Here was the head of what could only be Rayquaza, its jaws open as if uttering a cry. Fen did not recognise the material it was made from, but the whole gate shone green and gold, blocking out whatever laid behind it. And its sides were blocked by black clouds, as densely packed as the white platform they stood on.

Ryu, noting his gaze, turned himself. "That's where we think he is." Then he glanced back at Fen. "You alright?"

Fen looked at Ryu properly. He was quite how he expected himself to look. Physically unhurt, but with enormous fatigue in his eyes. A lot of relief, too. It *was* Ryu, undoubtedly.

"Yeah," Fen said. "Just about."

A good hug was exchanged, and Savi gave him a vine. They sat down on the cloud, which reminded Fen of a sofa. Zephia watched on idly, but after a moment said, "Fen."

"Hm?" he looked at her.

"Well done. On getting here. I've said it to the others, too… I don't know what you had to do, but it would have been a challenge."

"That's easy for you to say," Ryu needled. "You were the first one here!"

Zephia looked dimly at him. "You're right, I'm being too kind. My mistake, I'll tone it down from now on."

Ryu chuckled. "Zephia and I had a little bonding time, you see, when-"

Zephia gave him a warning look, and he quickly stopped. "Oh. Sorry. We agreed not to talk about the trials. Better not to, I think."

"I agree," Fen said. He appreciated that rule a great deal, in fact. "And thanks, Zephia." He got an idea. "Say, do Darks have any greeting you know of?"

"No," she said. "I don't think greetings exist outside of Kyunn, but I can't imagine what it'd be anyway."

"A mutual grunt?" Ryu offered. "That would be fitting."

Fen smiled. For the first time, he noticed what was sitting at Ryu's feet. "You got your bag back?"

"Yeah! Although… I didn't like, take it back from anyone. When I got here, it was just on my back again. Like it was never gone." He took a gulp of water. "Nothing got taken though. Wasn't much *to* take, but still, s'nice."

As Ryu passed the flask over, Fen considered his damp fur again. *Maybe our* souls *were the only things doing the trials. It would explain how otherworldly the scenarios were. And why our bodies are completely fine now.*

He had no doubt that this place *was* real, and couldn't help feeling a little anxious about it. They were in the middle of the sky, and the clouds holding them up might have been fortified in some way, but they still looked like *clouds.* How many thousands of metres high was this…?

He glanced at Savi, suddenly remembering the 'mon's own fear, but Savi seemed to know what he was thinking and gave a reassuring smile back. "The mountain trial prepared me for this," he said.

Fen smiled again. "Fair enough." He thought again about what Ryu had said. "Did you say you were waiting for me to get here?"

There was a moment's pause. "Yeah, but not for long," Savi said. "Between me, Ryu then you, barely any time."

"You didn't know if I'd be coming, though, until I arrived?"

"No… but we didn't doubt that you *would* get here. Would've waited all day, if that's what it took."

"Rayquaza likes to play games," Zephia added, shrugging.

Fen hummed in agreement. "Hopefully there's no more."

That seemed the wrong reply, judging by the silence that followed. Fen could sense the nervousness in the air. Eventually, he could

think of no other direction to go, so said, "Have you tried opening the… gate?"

Ryu and Savi looked to Zephia, who shook her head. "Admittedly, I only didn't go up to it at first because I wanted a rest. But since Savi arrived we were waiting for everyone else."

Fen nodded, thinking carefully. "So, assuming Rayquaza is behind that gate, and assuming he'll listen to us…" It seemed difficult to prepare anything for such an unknown scenario. "I think I should be the one who speaks to him. Tell him why we're here."

"Definitely," Ryu said. "That's only fair."

"I agree," Zephia said slowly. "However, what if we don't get what we ask for? We don't have any real idea of how Rayquaza will act. He might refuse us."

"I'm aware," Fen said. He felt another wave of mental exhaustion at the thought. "I don't know what to do then. We'll have to figure it out."

Zephia nodded. "Wasn't a helpful question, I suppose." She glanced behind them to the beckoning gate. "You want to open it, then?"

"Yes."

He stood up decisively, and the others followed at once. The gate was only a few metres away. It had no visible latch, so he and Ryu stepped up and pushed its base together. It opened easily but slowly, without a sound. Zephia stepped to his left, on Ryu's side, and Savi to his right, next to him.

Behind the gate was total darkness but for a single column of colour running from its centre. At first the light was barely discernible, but it gradually shifted from dark grey, to purple, to blue, until a patch of gold shone down onto a single, serpentine figure, coiled around something.

They waited a moment, but it didn't move or make a sound. The onus was on them. Fen glanced at Ryu, Zephia and Savi one last time. Briefly he considered everything that had led to here. Everything they'd suffered. It was all for this moment.

They started walking.

Falling Sky

Rayquaza was awake. That was the first thing Fen realised. He could tell that the Pokémon was looking at them long before they stood before him.

He had expected to be struck by Rayquaza's size, or how brightly his scales shone, like the gate in his image. But what stood out most was his eyes, entirely black except for two electrifying yellow pupils. They commanded such power that Fen was grateful the eyes only landed on him for a moment, as Rayquaza examined them all.

It was clear that Rayquaza caught his look of awe; perhaps that was all of their looks. He smiled slightly, then lifted his arms up and spread them apart. As he did, the ceiling of clouds around them followed. Moving them aside revealed a perfectly clear sky.

The seat Rayquaza sat in - though *sat* was hardly the word, for his body was coiled around it like a spring - was wider than it was high, and without any rests. The longer Fen looked, the less it looked like any chair and more like a bed, though a very padded, comfortable bed at that. Other than Rayquaza and his throne, the area around them was empty. But Fen felt as if putting anything more in this smooth, impossible formation of cloud would have ruined the sight.

"I am sure you know who I am," Rayquaza said at last. His voice carried a low growl, as if he hadn't spoken for a long time. "In all the ages I have resided here, the number of Pokémon to find their way to the dimension of trials is few, and those that have overcome it even fewer. I have been keeping eyes on all of you since you entered. I know that you came here together, and now stand here together. After all the trials you were subjected to, you persevered. So." He cast his eyes over them again. "Who might you be?"

His words had sounded appreciative, but Fen struggled to work out if that was the case. The best he could do for now was answer the

question.

"I'm Fen." He gestured to the others. "And this is Zephia, Ryu and Savi. We come from Kyunn."

Rayquaza's eyes narrowed at that, but he nodded. "You lead this group, Fen?"

"No," he said. "Well… if you had to choose a leader, it might be me. But we're all equals, really."

"I see." Rayquaza smiled. "Well, Fen. However you got here, there must have been a reason for it. I can tell how valuable it is to you. What do you seek from me? I am intrigued to hear."

Rayquaza *smiled* at him! Could this be right? After what Mesprit had said, Fen was anticipating a brooding, angry monster waiting here. Rayquaza had the whole dungeon of trials be built so he wouldn't be disturbed, had threatened other legendaries to help construct it… this wasn't the manner of a Pokémon like that.

But equally, Rayquaza had just given him the chance to make a request - what was he doing, thinking about all this?

"We seek your… help, Rayquaza."

"My *help* ?" Rayquaza repeated. "Please, elaborate."

"We need to you calm Groudon and Kyogre."

Rayquaza's expression changed for a split second; his whole body seemed to rumble in his throne. His face seemed to conflict over whether to smile again; when at last he replied, it wasn't there. "And why must I calm them?"

"Because… because they're out of control!" Fen exclaimed, Rayquaza's question surprising him. "Because on Hoenn, the place they were reawakened, their fighting has reduced the climate to constant extremes, which nothing can live in. All the humans there

that didn't manage to flee are just waiting to die, and the Pokémon… the weather has driven them insane, into… barely Pokémon at all! Groudon and Kyogre's effects are spreading more every day, to a constantly greater landmass… to more and more Pokémon, and I don't know…"

The thoughts seemed too frightening to be verbalised. On his last day on Kyunn, he'd seen how the weather was causing Pokémon to act more aggressively than normal. Their behaviour could only have escalated from then. He thought of Scout, that dozy, somehow ingenious shopkeeper; Lucxa, Savi's brother from whom Ivysaur found courage to fight for his life; and Cyan, wonderful, kind Cyan, who smelt of ash and whose fur was so soft and warm… were they alive anymore? No, forget that - were they *themselves* anymore?

Stay calm! he told himself, grimacing. *This is not the time to lose composure.*

"I don't know if it'll ever stop," he said at last. "Which is why we need you, Rayquaza. For humans and Pokémon, you're our last hope, our only hope… please."

He looked up at Rayquaza, whose eyes had been fixed on him. But now they were cold, and his smile had truly vanished.

"A passionate speech, it must be said," Rayquaza said. "However… you seem to take me for a fool, *Fen* . Do you believe that I am unaware of what takes place at your surface? You suppose that for all the ages I have sat here, I am content to just rest, passive to the world? Tell me."

At first Fen was too stunned to reply. What was happening? Had Rayquaza heard him properly?

"I know almost nothing about you, Rayquaza…"

"Hmph." Rayquaza smirked at him. "Understandable, I suppose. I can assure you, then, that over the eons I *have* looked down on your

world, I have watched societies form, grow, modernise, collapse; all of it. I am well aware of the havoc you describe."

His tone darkened. "However, there are things about you I do not understand. You say you came here from Kyunn. When did you arrive?"

"About eight days ago," Fen said, more firmly. "We flew across the sea, on a Salamence."

" *Eight days.* " Rayquaza scowled fiercely at him. "Then you lie. If that was so, why do you talk of saving *humans*, as if they are precious to you? This is a species not native to your island. *Hated* by many of your kind. They should mean very little to you."

Fen hadn't a clue how to reply. Rayquaza's scrutinising glare seemed to freeze up his mind. The Dragon continued. "Let me ask an easier question. You seem quite knowledgeable. How were Groudon and Kyogre awakened, exactly?"

Fen hesitated again, wondering if it were some kind of trick, but Rayquaza showed him nothing. Eventually he had to answer. "Some humans found two rocks underwater, that had really strange properties. After some testing, they deduced the rocks were storing Groudon and Kyogre, and then did everything they could to awaken them again… there was another rock too, a meteor that shared some properties with-"

" *Quiet!"*

Rayquaza's voice suddenly tripled in intensity. His mere presence in front of them suddenly felt terrifying.

Rayquaza leant forwards from his throne, his body straightening out until he was at eye level with Fen, almost touching his muzzle. "You're one of *them*, aren't you?"

When Fen didn't immediately respond, Rayquaza suddenly whipped his head around, and one his head wings smacked Fen in the face.

"Don't gawp at me, boy!" he snarled. "Answer!"

"Yes!" Fen cried, feeling his cheek tenderly. "I'm a human! Or I… I used to be. Not anymore. These three are just Pokémon," he added hastily, gesturing again to his teammates. "And they're aware of who I am."

Rayquaza looked satisfied, then laughed. "Very well. I do believe this is a first, then. I always wondered if such a transformation were possible. How did it happen to you?"

Fen, seeing an opportunity, answered at once. "It happened because I was running to save-"

"Actually, stop," Rayquaza said. Fen had no choice but to do so. "I don't *care* how it happened. We have other matters to discuss." He noticed Fen's frustration and smiled wickedly at him. "I have waited for so long to speak to one of your kind. This is a wonderful time for it. Where were we again…?" His gaze wandered for a moment. "Ah, yes. Groudon and Kyogre. Unfortunately for you, human - not that I would have done so anyway - I cannot calm them for you."

Silence. Then Ryu blurted, "What? What do you mean?"

Rayquaza's eyes flicked his way. "Excuse me?"

Ryu gritted his teeth. "Why can't you help us? You are able to control Groudon and Kyogre, aren't you?"

Rayquaza leaned forwards, for a moment looking like he would strike Ryu, too. But he quickly composed himself.

"Of course I can control them," he said. "They answer to no-one but me."

"Then-"

"Your answer is not one of *cannots,* Lucario. I will not control Groudon and Kyogre at this moment because I do not wish to."

"WHY NOT?" Ryu cried. "I don't understand! You know how bad it is, it's in your power, so how-"

" *Enough!"*

Like Fen, Ryu backed down the moment Rayquaza raised his voice. He didn't lose his indignant expression, though.

Rayquaza turned back to Fen. "The story you told me *was* true, human, but for one crucial detail. It was not the actions of your kind that awoke Groudon and Kyogre. It was mine."

Rayquaza seemed to wait just to see how he'd react. Fen stared at him, disbelieving. "But… there were the rocks that Groudon and Kyogre had been sealed in, humans were trying to awaken them-"

"No." Rayquaza sighed heavily. "No, no, no. Your kind always thinks they know it all. Tell me, do you *at least* know the circumstances of Groudon and Kyogre's first war? You know who it was that sealed them underwater?"

"Yes… it was you."

" *It was me.* Consider this. Do you think, when I subdued them then, that I would leave anything to chance? That I would let it be possible for Groudon and Kyogre to be woken again by… what, the attacks of mere mortals?"

"… No…"

"Of course not. Groudon and Kyogre are, and always will be, under solely my control. Those rocks exist merely because I needed a vessel for their souls to be stored. But that does not mean I wanted the rocks to be mined, to proudly be held up by humans in some

grotesque exhibit of theirs. I put deterrents in place in stop them. When attacked, the rocks would attack back."

He mused for a second. "On reflection, I regret not making their retaliations stronger. See, I have observed humans for long enough to know what they desire. They want power, wealth, *control* over everything possible. Yet even I did not expect them to look at Groudon and Kyogre's fossils, with the war between them written in every one of their historic texts, and see only what humanity could *gain* from their living.

"Perhaps, human, you are not aware of the lengths your kind went to. Of how many Pokémon, driven to mindless obedience by the humans' training of them from their very hatching, went down into the sea - the sea that was *dried up,* killing thousands more Water Pokémon - and were grievously injured, all in an attempt to fulfil their masters' greed. It went on for moons without stopping. Oh yes, the humans had *something* - some useless space rock they found - that they attributed value to in the middle of all this. Perhaps that lunacy gave them the belief to continue their torture.

"One day, I decided it was enough. I would give them what they wanted. They would see where their obsession with *controlling* Pokémon would take them, when the most destructive pair ever to walk your earth laid waste to their little island. I knew what awakening Groudon and Kyogre would do to the Pokémon, too. All Pokémon, even the most gentle, have a permanent kind of rage held within… what you might call a 'wildness'. Pokémon brought up well are able to contain this… under normal circumstances.

"But Pokémon and nature are so closely intertwined, that when Pokémon lose their embrace with it, this rage bursts out of them. So it was when Groudon and Kyogre first rose." Rayquaza smiled again. "If you think you have seen extreme weather here, human, you are mistaken. The days after they woke were beyond comparison. *That* is what drove every Pokémon here to their current state. And once in that state, with the weather never settling… Pokémon will not recover unless it does.

"Alas, if I could have avoided harming Pokémon, I would. But the humans needed to be shown what would happen when the creatures they had manipulated for so long turned, so suddenly, against them."

Fen felt like the world around him was crumbling. He had feared before that Rayquaza was already aware of the fighting happening below them, and for some reason hadn't stopped it. But he had never even considered that Rayquaza *himself* could be responsible. It was worse than the worst-case scenario.

But he couldn't give up. Everyone was riding on this. The Pokémon of Kyunn, though they didn't know it. The survivors in Fallarbor. Most of all, the three Pokémon with him.

"You did this so that the humans would suffer," Fen said slowly. "But you've seen what's happening below us. Haven't we - humans and Pokémon - suffered enough already?"

At that Rayquaza lurched forwards again, extending his neck until his head was hardly a foot from Fen's.

"You are not the *judge* of anything, human," the Dragon spat. "I have been here from the moment Pokémon and human crossed paths for the first time. *I* will decide when they have suffered enough."

"But what's the point of suffering if you can't learn from it?" Fen countered. "Rayquaza, if this goes on much longer, there won't be any humans left in Hoenn at all! And the Pokémon, behaving as they are, will wipe each other out soon after that."

Rayquaza, who had retreated back to his throne, gave him a look that seemed equivalent to a shrug. "You are making judgements again. Besides, your kind are slow to learn. I have been fair."

Fen became aware of the flaring fire from his tail. "Why are you the only one who can judge, anyway? We only made it here thanks to Mesprit's help. She's been alive just as long as you, hasn't she? Yet

she did all she could to try and stop the fighting. The same goes for the other guardians, Uxie and Azelf. So why do you - "

"Be *quiet!* " Fen could hear the angry breaths escaping Rayquaza's jaws. "I have nothing in common with those pathetic lake-dwellers. They think that eons of sleeping gives them some profound wisdom? No. As for *you,* human, no amount of pleading will help you. I have made my decision. You have already irritated me enough."

Strangely, Rayquaza hesitated after saying this, as if thinking about what to do.

"Rayquaza," Zephia said.

The Dragon grunted, turning to the Zoroark. "What?"

"I have a request," she said, sounding impossibly calm. "A different one."

"Too late! You already had your chance-"

"You'll reconsider when I tell you what it is."

Rayquaza paused, then snarled at her. "You dare play games with me, child?"

Zephia said nothing, her stony expression unwavering. Her defiance seemed to unnerve Rayquaza, for he did not argue either. Finally, he rasped, "Go on, then. *Say it* ."

"We'll fight you. All four of us."

Fen stared at her, realising a second too late that Rayquaza would notice him. But he couldn't help it. Neither could Ryu or Savi. Zephia had surely gone insane. Challenging Rayquaza to a fight was the severely painful equivalent to challenging a Linoone to a footrace. Impossible.

Rayquaza looked stunned at first, then he started laughing. "In all my time here, no mortal has ever challenged me to a fight. I am happy to accept, though your friends appear to disagree."

"Good," Zephia said. "Here are the conditions. If you win, then you can do whatever you like with us. But if you lose-"

"Oh, child," Rayquaza interrupted, grinning. "There is a fine line between bravery and stupidity, you know. You stand no chance against me."

Zephia ignored him. "If you *lose*, you'll do as we ask. Do you accept?"

"Yes, I accept! I will take much pleasure in seeing you suffer." He glanced at Fen. " *Especially* this one. Let us begin, then. Right… *now* ."

From his throne, Rayquaza waved an arm, and in an instant the calm, clear warmth of the clouds was gone. A gale brewed so sudden and fierce that it threw Fen off his feet. It felt like he'd walked under a waterfall, one that angled itself horizontally. The rain was impossibly thick, every droplet fist-sized. He was drenched the moment it started falling.

By the time he found some stability on all-fours, he had lost several metres of ground on Rayquaza. He turned left to find Ryu and Zephia in a similar position. They were fighting merely to stay where they were, let alone move forwards.

Even if we could move, what would we do? Attack Rayquaza? Rayquaza's the most powerful Pokémon alive; we wouldn't leave a scratch on him!

He screamed a curse into the sky. Of all the ways they could have failed, succumbing to an endless rain monsoon was one of the worst imaginable. He would keep trying, he would give everything he had

until he was incapable of more, for they had come too far for anything less. But this, surely, was the end.

Zephia jerked an arm from her side and gestured that they come closer. But Fen gestured at himself, to say ' *I can't!* ' His legs were already numb with pain. He was almost glad now to have experienced the trial with the canoe, for the pain was similar. Though even then, he'd had the help of-

Someone shouted beside him, then grabbed his hand. *Savi.*

"We can make it together," he said, having to scream himself over the elemental roar. "My vine's stronger than my paw, though."

Fen understood. He looked to Savi's bud and a vine shot out, just long enough for him to hold. Any greater length would have unbalanced them both.

Miraculously, having something to tug onto worked. Though he could still only crawl, they had only ever been paces from Ryu and Zephia, who stood together. Ryu held out a paw to Fen, and he could almost reach out and grab it-

Suddenly, the rain and wind shifted 90 degrees. Straight into his and Savi's faces. Fen lost balance, and the Ivysaur followed.

But then a clattering of limbs landed beside them. Ryu and Zephia had come to them, somehow.

Zephia addressed them at once. "To stand any chance, we'll have to move together."

"You think we *have* a chance?" Fen cried.

"Yes, I do! Rayquaza is… not as strong as he wants us to think."

Fen pulled a look of disbelief. "How do you…?"

Zephia gritted her teeth. "Hear me out. Why did he stop after saying he wasn't going to listen to you? Why didn't he just kill you? He was angry enough."

"There's… many possible reasons-"

"Okay - what about his size? What is he, the size of Shaice? That's nothing compared to Groudon and Kyogre. He's just a large Pokémon."

At that, Fen paused. She *was* right…

"And right now, he hasn't even left his stupid chair! If he's so powerful, he should be able to fight us himself, instead of this cowardly weather-"

Fen registered a tiny *pop* in the air; but if it wasn't for Ryu yanking him backwards, the warning wouldn't have mattered. A huge, wide lightning bolt pierced the space the four of them had just been. Zephia and Savi had managed to pull themselves away in time.

For a moment, there was no rain. The air was still. Fen looked up and saw Rayquaza wave his arm; then the wind turned shudderingly cold, and a thousand tiny hail bricks pounded them.

Zephia stomped back to them. She reached out and pulled Savi closer, as he was wincing from the ice.

"See, he can only control one type of weather at a time; that's another limitation we've got."

"How about a limitation that helps us *win* ?" Savi cried.

Zephia didn't say anything, just looking pointedly at Ryu. The Lucario seemed to understand and began moving his arms… but in the wind, Fen wasn't sure what he was trying. It wasn't working. Eventually Ryu dropped onto his side, yelping in pain - the ground itself had

turned hard as ice - and said to Fen, "Get the scarves out, would ya?"

There was no time for him to register surprise or consider how foolish he'd been to forget them. It was lucky that almost everything else in Ryu's bag had been depleted; it made the scarves easy to dig out, though his shivering hands were slow to get a good hold.

"If one of us can hit him, he might lose control of the weather," Zephia said. "That's what we've got to aim for right now." She frowned. "But… what do your scarves actually *do* ?"

There was another pop. "Ryu!" Savi yelped.

Ryu looked up just as a gleaming, white-hot bolt descended straight into him.

Except… it didn't. The lightning hit something blue, but it wasn't his chest. It was like an invisible wall. The lighting squirmed and fizzled for a second, as if caught by surprise, but then dissipated into the air. The blue barrier disappeared the moment it stopped, and Ryu fell backwards, gasping.

Rayquaza made a rumble of discontent. "You will die a slow and painful death if you continue to merely *stand there*," he said, voice laced with derision. "Either face up to me or surrender!"

He waved a dismissive arm and the hail returned, somehow even thicker and heavier than before.

"Ryu," Savi said, his voice straining, "did your aura just…?"

"Block it? I… think so." Ryu managed a smile, getting back to his feet. "It's thinking faster than me."

"Can you do another barrier like that?" Savi asked, speaking with urgency. "Like, consciously?"

Ryu blinked. "It took a lot of energy, but I guess-"

"Could you put it around one of us?"

"I…" Ryu frowned. "I don't know, 'mon."

"We have the scarf - here, it's this one." Savi snatched the red material of the element scarf out of Fen hand to give to him. "This'll help."

Still, Ryu was unsure. "Will it give me enough energy…?"

"It basically made me Celebi. It should do."

But Ryu can't move with it on, Fen thought. He looked at Savi, suddenly the strategist; he had switched on his fighting mode at the right time. "You're thinking that one of us tries charging Rayquaza alone, with Ryu giving them a barrier?"

"If we only need one hit to stop the weather, then yeah, why not?"

"It's a good plan," Zephia agreed. "Fen, you're the fastest. Is there a scarf which makes you even faster?"

"The evasion scarf… but…"

Zephia had been about to speak, but his tone of doubt left her mouth hanging open. "But what?" she pressed.

Fen wasn't sure if they had gotten more used to the weather, or if Rayquaza had been easing off. In any case, a fresh ice-blast of wind hit him then, taking the words of reply from his mouth and sending him tumbling even further from the Dragon. Hitting the ice-coated ground only added to his pain.

Zephia tried to get him up again, but his body wanted to shut everything out. It was only when she slapped him around the face that he woke up again. She and Ryu seemed far more in control of themselves than he. A little distance away, Savi was trying desperately not to get pushed any further from them, digging his paws into what little grip the ground offered.

Fen had been about to highlight more precisely the drawbacks of the evasion scarf, but there was no point now. Rayquaza's impatience with them was clear. They had to attack while they still had a chance.

"There's no room for error," he told Zephia.

She grunted. "Well, can the third scarf help us too?"

"That's the…" Ryu paused, and Fen met his gaze. He knew that they were thinking the same thing.

"It's very powerful, but you'll kinda lose your mind if you wear it," Ryu told Zephia. "Maybe just hold onto it for now."

He passed the red scarf over, but Zephia hesitated. "There's no point in holding it. I may as well take the whole bag. Especially if you won't be able to move."

Ryu gave her the bag without argument - though removing it from his shoulders was a task in itself - and Zephia pre-tied the scarf to slip over her head. Her paws' dexterity when Fen couldn't feel his own fingers was remarkable.

"Ryu, sort out your barrier thing," she said. "I'll distract him."

"Distract…?" Ryu said, as Zephia stood up and turned to Rayquaza's throne. She placed herself so Rayquaza's view of Fen and Ryu was blocked.

"Is this the best weather you can do?!" she screamed.

Fen was about to crane his neck around her, but stopped himself. *Rayquaza will hit us if he sees what we're planning,* he realised. *That's what she meant by distracting.*

Sometimes, Zephia was so far ahead of them tactically that she seemed to forget that it wasn't a one-Pokémon game.

"Do the barrier, then," Fen repeated to Ryu, as Zephia shouted some more expletives he didn't take notice of. Ryu put the element scarf on, and his initial wide-eyed response was as Fen expected.

"Take my paws," Ryu said, a new assurance in his tone. Fen did so, and the Lucario closed his eyes.

Fen heard a roaring of Rayquaza's laughter, and the weather shifted from hail to a more powdery, blizzard-like snow. Even more difficult to see, or move-

Then he felt a sensation that was strangely like being wrapped in a film of plastic. It started from his hands, then spread quickly until his whole body, save for the fire on his tail, was inside the protective bubble.

Ryu stepped away from him, but still grimaced with strain. "It's done, but something's wrong… I can feel the barrier getting pushed against…"

Fen looked at his hand. Snow was bouncing off it. The barrier must already be in effect. It wouldn't last long in this weather.

He slipped on the evasion scarf and turned. Zephia and Savi looked significantly clearer, like he'd put on glasses.

"Zephia?" he said. The Zoroark was still facing Rayquaza. "I'm ready."

She glanced backwards. "I'll go with you. Two targets are harder to knock down than one." She glanced at Savi, who was still simply bracing himself against the new snowstorm. "Stay with Ryu."

Savi nodded and started inching in the Lucario's direction. Fen offered his arm to Zephia, which she accepted without hesitation. Then they set off.

They ran as fast as they could into the snow. Fen was quite amazed that Zephia could move forwards at all; as it was, running with her only slowed him a little, and made him feel far more assured about their mission.

Fen noticed Rayquaza's eyes lock onto them as they approached; before he could think, he yanked Zephia forwards with him as another flash of lightning came down.

Zephia screamed. In the brief lull of weather, the sound seemed magnified. As Fen looked back, he had to bite his own mouth to stop himself doing the same.

From below her right knee to the bottom of her foot, Zephia's leg fur had been completely seared off. The skin underneath it was burned a deep red.

The weather changed again. There was no rain, snow or hail this time, but the wind was stronger than ever.

Zephia rolled onto her front, then very slowly began pushing herself up. When she reached her burnt leg, she cried out again.

"Zephia, don't!" Fen said.

After a moment, she somehow stayed upright, and grimaced at him. "It's better than it looks."

"But your- better than it looks?! What does that mean?"

"It means-" She spat viciously, the contents of which disappeared immediately in the wind. Her mane was like a parachute behind her. "It means you're wasting time with me! You can move, can't you? Go!"

Fen looked forlornly at her, but knew he had no choice. He turned into the wind and started running again. It only held his boosted limbs back a little.

As he neared Rayquaza's throne, the Dragon finally uncoiled himself from it, and with a thrash of his tail kicked it far into the mist behind. He was within reach now, looking truly like the Rayquaza of myths; floating two feet from the ground, his body lifted straight behind him.

Why isn't he flying higher? Is the wind affecting him too? Fen could feel his mind going into overdrive with anxiety. *Where should I hit him? What if he attacks first? What if he's too fast for me?*

His eyes were drawn to Rayquaza's arms, the lowest part of him. That would have to do. He started drawing fire into his wrist, readied his legs for a leap. His focus meant that, even with the scarf, he didn't see the tail swoop until it was too late.

It sliced through the gale like it didn't exist: the fastest attack he had ever seen. But an inch from his neck, the tail stopped dead. Ryu's barrier lit up and pushed it back, sparks of aura flying off. For a frozen moment, Fen saw the tail's magnificence closer than surely any mortal had before; the thousands of tiny green scales, the razor-sharp fins at the tail's tip-

The barrier burst. Fen recoiled, but so did the tail. Rayquaza hesitated. It must've been a tiny pause in normal time, but the scarf took Fen beyond normal.

He changed plans. With one lunge forwards, he jumped towards the outstretched tail, moving so quickly that he barely had time to re-engulf his arm with fire. But he did. His right hand grabbed hold of one of the fins at the tail's end, and his left crunched into the base of it.

The dense scales didn't bend or smash, but Rayquaza roared at the impact. He swung his tail furiously, and Fen held on desperately for a moment, both hands clutching the fin, before realising what a bad idea that was.

Rayquaza realised too. The tail stopped moving, and Rayquaza's head bent around in front of him, jaws open and gathering heat. Fen

shoved himself off just before the blast of dragon-fire could reach him.

But the ground was hard and unyielding, the pain of hailstones into his back magnified by the scarf. Ryu's barrier was definitely gone. Fen scrabbled to try and loosen the scarf, as Rayquaza loomed over him and gathered another mouthful of fire-

But, in concentrating on Fen, Rayquaza had forgotten the weather. Which meant that, though her leg was still burning, Zephia could find the strength to jump onto one of the sets of wings that hung from the Dragon's body. As her good foot dug into the scales for balance, her shadowy claws slashed at him faster than ever before. The surprise made Rayquaza twist around, losing control of his fire.

Now it was Zephia's turn to scramble away. Just as she freed her feet, Rayquaza's wing flicked upwards, throwing her into the air. She felt half her mane get sliced apart as the Dragon's claws raked across her, shoving her hard into the ground.

Her breath was knocked out of her, and she could only look hopefully behind them. But the hope wasn't misplaced. Savi and Ryu, now scarf-free, hared towards Rayquaza.

Ryu saw the alarm in the Dragon's eyes, as he tried to watch their approach while keeping track of Fen, who had backed away a few paces. Ryu wasn't sure himself what he and Savi would do, but it was best to look confident.

Suddenly Rayquaza's wings flexed and he moved away from them. At the wave of his arm, a new snowstorm started up. There was little wind on this one, just a monsoon of snow. Ryu gritted his teeth and kept moving; Rayquaza had come to a still, as he seemed to when controlling weather. But the Dragon suddenly let loose a jet of ice from his mouth. It sprayed in a semi-circle to target all of Ryu, Savi and Fen. Ryu had no time to dodge, nor Savi.

But Fen did. Though he winced as Ryu and Savi were glaciated, Rayquaza had *telegraphed* the attack as far as his scarf was concerned. He'd simply moved forwards under the blast, then moved straight back as it passed.

Rayquaza looked at the frozen 'mon for a second, then his head snapped back at Fen, the Dragon's jaws bared in fury. "ENOUGH OF YOUR MAGIC!" he roared, glaring at the scarf. "FIGHT ME WITH YOUR TRUE STRENGTH!"

Fen would struggle to remember the following moments even with a clear head. Rayquaza lunged headfirst at him, gaining an impossible velocity so quickly. Fen just rolled under him. As he did, he saw Rayquaza's tail scoop to try and catch him. Too close to get out of the way, he jumped *towards* the tail, using it to push off again.

With his back turned, Rayquaza lunged behind himself with an arm; Fen scrambled away on all-fours. Rayquaza's jaws moved towards his tail; some unknown muscular reflex jerked his tail away. Rayquaza paused, re-balanced himself and approached Fen once more. His body began a slight circular motion, then suddenly spun towards Fen like a spring. The attack was surprising even for Fen. He managed to somersault over the 'mon, but this move was a little *too* improvised. He flew out of control and landed flat on his back.

As he gasped for breath, Rayquaza loomed over him, snarling triumphantly. He forced his hand upwards to his neck, and with a final desperate effort wrenched the scarf away from it. *Whatever's about to happen,* he thought briefly, *at least it won't hurt as much.*

Rayquaza's tail kicked him into the air and away, like Ryu throwing a stone. Fen had intended to hold onto the scarf, but the impact took it from his grip immediately. His flight was so flat and so fast that he skidded for a few seconds on the hard ground before stopping. But he was lucky; Rayquaza had mainly caught his chest, and nothing important was broken. Though that still left a deep soreness in his bones, not to mention the freezing snow he had been covered with.

Ryu had thawed himself out of the ice just before Fen had been kicked. When Rayquaza turned his attentions to him, Ryu was struck by the 'mon's speed. It was slower, only by a fraction, but noticeable.

The weather was still too, which he assumed meant that Rayquaza wasn't controlling it. Ryu glanced at Savi beside him, who himself had just broken free of the ice. "Any ideas?" he said.

Savi looked at the element scarf in his paw. "Use this? We don't have anything else." Zephia was holding their bag, and Fen's scarf had been lost.

"Could you restrict Rayquaza with your vines?" Ryu asked.

Savi frowned. "I have no idea."

"Even just a little would be huge for us." Ryu didn't speak his biggest concern: *We're already in a far worse shape than Rayquaza. I didn't expect to have* any *chance, so it's going better than that, but… we have to win this!*

"If you distract him, I'll get around his other side and have time to put the scarf on there," Savi said.

Ryu nodded, and they began running in arcs around each of the Dragon's sides. But as Rayquaza weighed up them both, he focused immediately on Savi. "I told you, NO MAGIC!"

With a lash of his tail Rayquaza swatted Savi aside. The scarf fell from his grip and Rayquaza snatched it, then smouldered it with purple fire until it melted in his hand.

Amid the despair at what he saw, Ryu noticed an opening on his left. He sprinted towards the nearest piece of Rayquaza, one of his small wings. But as he was about to reach out a fist, Rayquaza swivelled impossibly fast, and suddenly he was facing the Dragon's mouth that was still holding its stream of fire.

Ryu screamed. It felt like he'd been dropped into a lava pool. He scrambled away and dropped to the ground as soon as he was beyond the fire, frantically rolling in the mercifully cold slush.

The fire didn't follow him, but he didn't dare look back at Rayquaza. He turned and searched for anything, anyone else, and found… Zephia. His mind had cast her aside after watching her leg get fried and body pummelled by their enemy.

She was on her feet now, gesturing furiously for him to come closer. Ryu eventually staggered over, seeing Zephia's bad leg hanging limply in the air; she was doing a good job of balancing without it.

"I've got an idea," she said.

"Really?" Ryu was genuinely surprised, but Zephia seemed to take it as sarcasm, judging from her irritated hiss.

"You can do a thing with physical attacks, can't you? Where you rebound onto the attacker."

Ryu looked gravely at her. "I'd already thought of countering. The problem is that Rayquaza could use his tail, *or* he could burn me. Only the first one would work. If I prepare a counter and he doesn't use something physical, I'll be finished."

"But he *won't*," Zephia said. "Have you noticed how he hates scarves? Fen and Savi have both lost theirs because Rayquaza was so determined to get them off."

It hadn't occurred to him, but Zephia's observation put the pieces together in his head. "Okay, so what?"

"He *physically* has to get them off you! If you're holding a scarf, he'll definitely slap it away, or something like that."

Ryu's eyes lit up; then dimmed. "We only have the mad scarf left though. I wouldn't trust myself to do anything with that, plus if we lost

it-"

"No," Zephia interrupted. She grabbed hold of his arm, almost startling him, and stood so her back was to Rayquaza. "Watch this."

Ryu did so, and… he blinked. Dangling from his paw was a glowing white scarf. Bewildered, he reached out with his opposite paw-

"It's not real!" Zephia said quickly, swatting him away. "Don't touch it. It's a different kind of illusion. As long as we're in contact, the scarf will appear to everyone. Unless I get hurt, but that's irrelevant. All we need is to be attacked."

She glanced at Rayquaza, who was low to the ground. "He's not doing anything. He must be tiring already."

Ryu just nodded, amazed. At that moment he heard pawsteps from two directions. Fen and Savi were both reaching them, both moving with grimaces.

"What's happening?" Fen asked at once. His eyes burst open at the sight of the scarf. "What's-?!"

"Stay here!" Zephia barked, then threw Ryu's bag into Fen's hands. "Both of you."

Ryu shot Fen a hopeful look as he turned back to Rayquaza with the Zoroark. They ran towards him, and when the Dragon saw the scarf he didn't say a word, simply roaring with anger.

Ryu had been stilling himself for the counter as soon as the scarf was noticed, but it still took every ounce of focus not to bolt at the sight of the massive tail flying towards him. When it connected, there was a small, white eruption around him. Every one of his muscles felt like it was being ripped open. Zephia was thrown off him, despite the tail not touching her.

Yet he endured, knowing that failing now would surely end all their hopes. He screamed with agony, black spots appearing in his vision, his body begging for him to stop…

The tail recoiled. Ryu was engulfed in a whiteness so huge and harsh that it blinded him. But he knew where Rayquaza was.

Fen watched an alarm, even terror cross the great Dragon's face. When Ryu tackled him, it made a deafening bang, an explosion of light. Then a crash on the ground he could feel from metres away.

When the light cleared, Ryu was flat on his stomach, unmoving except for his twitching tail. But Rayquaza was on his stomach too. His eyes remained open, but he was *down.*

Fen and Savi exchanged a glance. *We can do this,* Fen thought, for the first time. He ran forwards with Savi to where Zephia was picking herself up. She too wore a look of delighted surprise.

"Give me that," she said, gesturing to the bag.

Fen did so, before he could think about it. "Wait, why-"

She pulled out their final scarf, the *real* scarf, and gave him an urgent, ' *yes or no?'* kind of look.

Fen still didn't understand how she wasn't writhing in pain from her burnt leg. But he conceded that there would probably never be a better time, or Pokémon, to wear this scarf. Ahead, Rayquaza now seemed unable or unwilling to fly, simply propping himself up with his arms. His eyes still burned with anger. He wasn't finished yet.

"Can you fight?" he asked Zephia.

"You know I can."

"What about you, Savi?"

The Ivysaur grimaced. "Well enough?"

It echoed Fen's own thoughts. *That'll do.* "We'll attack as one, then. And, yes," he nodded to Zephia, "put it on. But…"

From some deep reserve of energy, he found the strength to think. "Give Savi and I… a moment to approach first," he said. "We'll distract him from you."

Zephia nodded, then seemed to give the smallest of smiles. "Go, then," she said. "I'm ready."

Fen and Savi ran at him. Fen spat the strongest flamethrower he could at Rayquaza's left, while Savi sent a barrage of seed pellets at his right, at least a dozen a second, which exploded as they hit.

Rayquaza screeched in anger, and his mouth filled with more purple flames. But the instant his jaws opened, they were forced shut again. Newly scarf-clad, Zephia leapt onto his head, claws practically dripping with the shadowy aura she commanded, and she slashed furiously at Rayquaza's face. The Dragon writhed his head in defence, but Zephia managed to grab onto one of the rudder-like wings above it. She bit into the base of it, and Rayquaza screeched twice as loud as before.

The sight in front of Fen and Savi was so remarkable that they paused for a moment. Then Fen averted his gaze and saw Rayquaza's arms visibly shaking under the weight of his huge frame. "Go for these!" he told Savi, gesturing.

He gave as many fire punches as he could manage to Rayquaza's left. Savi assaulted the Dragon's right with more seeds, before throwing his whole weight into it for good measure.

Fen heard a cry from Zephia, then a thud on the ground. A moment later, Rayquaza's arms shuddered, and the arm closest to Savi collapsed. The Dragon began falling. Savi's vines shot out, Fen grabbed them instinctively, and pulled with all his remaining energy. It was just enough to haul Savi to the side of the collapsing body,

and then scramble away for good measure. The ground shook again when Rayquaza fell. He didn't move.

Zephia had ended up by their side. By the way she was wheezing, bloody and with several chunks of fur missing, it wasn't by choice. She still wore the scarf, so Fen leant over and yanked it off her head before she could notice. Zephia's pupils constricted, she looked at him briefly, astonishment and confusion on her face, then sank to her knees.

Fen heard pawsteps beside him. Ryu could hardly stand himself, but he looked at them with a weary, disbelieving smile as if to say, ' *We did it.'*

Then there was a quiet groan. With some effort, Rayquaza flicked his head up at them. Spittle sprayed from his jaws as he tried to speak.

"You… you cannot… YOU WILL NOT DEFEAT ME!"

The four wings on his head suddenly glowed white. Then with one great flex of his body, he jumped into the air, smashing headfirst into the ground as he landed.

It created an earthquake. In that moment, all Fen could do was try to endure the pain and panic that came with it.

Savi, however, could see more. He saw the centre of the cloud-like floor splinter and then break apart from Rayquaza's impact, chunks of hail and slush falling through. And next to him he saw Zephia, still dazed from all her injuries, standing right where the rift was about to reach.

Savi just had time to throw both his vines out and wrap them around the Zoroark. What he didn't have time for was to pull her safe.

Zephia seemed to realise just as the ground parted what was happening, but her desperate scrabbling was too late. She fell,

taking the vines with her. Savi screamed, jamming his claws into the ground desperately, and they managed to hold right at the edge of the rift. He looked down and saw endless, endless sky beyond Zephia and his vines. Who knew how far up they were? How long the fall to earth would take…?

He stood there stranded for a few moments before hearing Fen's voice behind him, faint and shaking almost to the point of incomprehensibility.

"If I pull you," Fen managed to say, "could you lift her out?"

Savi didn't have time to consider the odds. It was a matter of seconds before he'd lose Zephia. "I don't know, but try."

Fen saw no need to reply either. He tried to steady his spinning vision enough to be sure he had a good hold on the Ivysaur's back. "Okay… now!"

Giving Savi a yank, the Ivysaur used the momentum to throw his vines into the air, flinging Zephia upwards. The angle was just great enough to make her safe; Zephia had to scramble her legs away from the rift as she landed. All of them lay down then, including Ryu, who looked between them quite disbelievingly.

As did Zephia. "T-thank you," she gasped at Fen and Savi.

Fen looked back to Rayquaza warily, praying against another surprise attack. Despite their cumulative exhaustion, Ryu very slowly got up and started approaching the Dragon again.

"Don't attack!" Rayquaza said suddenly. His eyes were wide, and voice hoarse and cracked with pain. Ryu stopped at once, stunned.

Rayquaza breathed heavily for a few moments. "I… should not have risen to your request. I did not think that, already… I thought it would be much longer before I became inadequate…"

Fen frowned. It sounded like Rayquaza was rambling. "What do you mean?" he said, putting on his strongest voice.

Rayquaza took a long time to reply. "My strength comes from the sky, nanoparticles in the ozone layer," he said. "Groudon and Kyogre are disturbing this. In this way, their fighting… it affects me as much as you mortals. I knew that, but sitting up here I had underestimated how much power I had already lost."

So Zephia was right… about pretty much everything. They had not taken down the real Rayquaza, not really. But what they *had* defeated had agreed to a deal with them. Fen struggled to find much sympathy for the Dragon's own arrogance.

"You agreed to this fight," he said. "And since we won, you have to calm Groudon and Kyogre."

"That… that is the problem," Rayquaza croaked. He looked up, straight into Fen's eyes. They were not commanding any more. "They only listen to me if I have transformed myself into my most primal form. But the transformation requires energy. Energy that has been fought out of me."

The weight of his words slowly began to hit Fen. "But… you'll recover, won't you? You're not grievously injured…"

Rayquaza's look told him the answer . "I *would* recover, but Groudon and Kyogre still fight. The scales are not tipped in my favour. I can only grow weaker." The Dragon's great head slumped to the ground. "I still believed I was in control. Perhaps the pain I felt simply escalated my determination to continue to spite your world, to punish… and I took things too far."

"But you're - you're *Rayquaza* !" Zephia said. There was a fear, a panic in her voice that Fen had never heard before. "There must be something you can do! You can't just… just *die* ! Not now!"

"There is nothing to be done," Rayquaza said, almost whispered. He closed his eyes. "I have made a terrible, terrible mistake… if only I had realised… before it was too late…"

Rayquaza lay still. The four Pokémon looked at each other. They were unable to find words.

Rayquaza may have been growing weaker, Ryu thought, *and he may have refused to put an end to his own mess… but* we've *killed him . We killed the only thing that gave us any hope.*

He screwed his eyes shut. *No,* he thought desperately. *He can't die. He* can't die *! He can't−*

Ryu was bawling. Partly from the cuts on his arms where he'd been caught by thorns, and the dull aching on the back of his head, but also from fear. In the darkness, all he could imagine was that purple, floating, evil face appearing in front of him again. Screaming.

He was held tightly in his father's paws, as the Lucario's feet darted up the mountain slope to their cave. Rycaro had whispered a few words of comfort as he had run through the Forest, which had helped a little, but not sufficiently.

Finally, they arrived back in the cave. Home. His mother was over to them at once, and Ryu was passed over to her. She laid him gently on his bedroll.

" *Oh dear," she murmured, looking over his arms. "Where does your head hurt, Ry?"*

Ryu tried to motion with a paw, but couldn't reach. "It's just here," Rycaro said, touching a bumpy-feeling area on the back of his head.

Arcia nodded, then her paws started glowing. Ryu instinctively let out a little whimper.

" *It's alright, pet," she said soothingly. "This will ease the pain."*

She put her hands where his head hurt, and Ryu suddenly felt a great heat flow through him, like the warmth of a hug, or of sitting next to a fire on a bitter day. The pain gradually melted away with it, and he felt much better. His mother was smiling adoringly up at him.

" *Do you need any help?" Rycaro asked, motioning to Ryu's arms.*

" *His cuts are only little, so I wouldn't think so," Arcia replied, then added with a chuckle, "Hold me if I look faint, though."*

They both laughed at that, and Ryu did too, though only because he wanted to join in. His mother's paws glowed again, and the cuts slowly faded until barely an outline was visible. The relief was wonderful. As the last of them was healed, he sighed contentedly and closed his eyes, only vaguely aware of his mother almost losing her balance over him.

As the memory faded, Ryu felt like a different Pokémon. Suddenly, there *was* something he could do. He'd forgotten that that ability of his parents even existed. He had never asked them about it.

But that worried him. That memory was the only time he could ever remember it being used; not even with any of his siblings. If that was the case, *why* ? Why had the ability been withheld when it seemed so miraculous? More importantly… how did Arcia do it? She used her aura to *heal* him. That was a big difference from throwing it at someone, or creating a barrier. He knew what he *wanted* to do, could see his paws gain that pink light in his mind, but…

There was no time for doubt. He looked at Rayquaza again, but nothing new came to him.

C'mon, he thought, gritting his teeth. *What does saving Rayquaza's life mean? Why is it so important?*

There were so many reasons. Stopping Groudon and Kyogre. Calming the Pokémon of Hoenn - and those of Kyunn, if they had become the same. Giving him a chance of seeing his family again. Saving the rest of the world from all manner of destruction and death.

And, on the most basic of levels, this was what he and Fen had struggled for almost from the very start. His friend had overcome unimaginable traumas just to make it this far with him. They were *not*, after all of that,about to watch their last shred of hope fade away in front of them-

Then he felt it. A different kind of heat in his paws. That pinkish light glowing within. It was startlingly intimate, like this aura really was *him*, more so than ever before.

He heard nothing as he walked forwards. The rest of the world had been passed aside. He looked up at Rayquaza's huge figure and a jolt of panic passed through him. He almost lost the energy. Rayquaza was not a scared child with a bump on his head… but no, that was irrelevant. He could only give what he had.

He put his paws on Rayquaza's head and started pushing the energy onto him. Rayquaza's eyes opened almost at once, staring at him. But Ryu couldn't let himself lose focus. He kept pushing, feeling himself weaken, until… until-

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"T-take him!" Rayquaza cried at the three of them. "Take him off me, now!

Startled, Fen leapt forwards and pulled Ryu away. His paws stopped glowing at once, and he fell limply into Fen's arms.

"Ryu?" Fen said. "Ryu!"

The Lucario's eyes were closed. But Fen heard a soft breath from him, and practically sagged in relief. At least he was alive.

Fen looked back at Rayquaza. "W-what just happened?"

Rayquaza looked almost as surprised as him. "Your Lucario… wanted to give his own strength for my own." His voice was firm again, though he also seemed quite lost for words. "If he had kept going, I fear he would have killed himself trying. I wish his sacrifice could be worthwhile… but one mortal's strength is far from the energy that I require."

Fen's heart sank again. Ryu's efforts were not enough. Just *how* Ryu had known to do such a thing was impossible enough in itself. For some reason, Fen was reminded of finding Mesprit at the beach in Lilycove, when simply touching her released energy that he had never knowingly had access to. Sadly, he knew that, after he'd wanted to save Ryu after the Scyther attack and been unable to, he would never have that kind of power again…

He stopped. *I don't have that kind of power… but Mesprit does. Uxie and Azelf, too.*

"Rayquaza," he said carefully. "Are you able to get to Sky Pillar from here?"

Rayquaza blinked. "We sit directly above Sky Pillar," he said. "Why?"

"Mesprit is there. She's in contact with Uxie and Azelf too. They… have energy, do they not? Energy to heal you with?"

Rayquaza's eyes widened; he understood. Then they were drawn to the crack running through the room, which his own earthquake had opened.

"I cannot fly you down there," he said. "But I think I can fall in the right place." He half-squirmed, half-crawled across the ground, using his arms for support. The others followed, Fen gingerly carrying Ryu, until they all stood in front of the abyss.

Rayquaza made his body almost flat. "My wings will give the best protection," he said, coughing as his voice almost failed. "If I cannot explain the situation to Mesprit, one of you must do so. This fall will hurt me the most, as long as you hold on."

Fen felt a nudge. "I'll hold onto him," Savi said, gesturing to Ryu. Once they were on Rayquaza, Savi wrapped his vines tightly against one of the wings above Rayquaza's head, with Ryu squeezed in between them. Fen took hold of the other head wing, while Zephia gripped the next wing down of many on the Dragon's body.

Rayquaza gave them a glance, and when they nodded, he pushed his arms away into the gap. Then, they were falling.

Rayquaza started nearly vertical. But for his hands on the wing, Fen's body was hopelessly airborne, disconnected from the world. At first, he saw nothing below them but clouds, *felt* nothing but the wind breaking their fall. Some time later - it felt like hours - shapes of sea and land appeared. Rain began hitting them.

As they continued to plummet, Rayquaza lowered his head and moved his tail horizontal with it. Their fall began to slow, and Fen felt a little more secure in his grip. But then the ground approached all too quickly. He could see the shapes of Groudon and Kyogre in the distance, and the huge waves the sea was throwing up, and below them-

Rayquaza smashed into the spire of Sky Pillar. The old rock didn't hold up, crumbling beneath them. Fen fought to keep his grip, before one particularly great convolution threw him off. He screamed…

But barely fell at all before hitting the ground. He was on land, the thin rock platform that led up what was the spire. The sea was either side of him, but by some miracle he'd missed it. He looked behind him; Rayquaza and the spire remains were covered in a dust so thick that almost nothing could be seen of them.

" *Fen?"*

He had never been so glad to hear a telepathic voice.

Mesprit looked quite astonished to see him. She was dripping with water, and the pinkness she had radiated previously was dimmer. " *What's… how did you-"*

Fen tried to reply telepathically, then realised with a jolt that he no longer could. "I'll explain later," he said, though the dust made him wheeze a little. "Are you still in contact with Uxie and Azelf?"

" *I can reach them telepathically, if that is what-"*

"Good. We need your help. Rayquaza's dying." He couldn't say the words fast enough.

Mesprit stared at him. " *You mean, the changing weather is-"*

"Yes! He can't calm Groudon and Kyogre!"

Mesprit took a moment's pause. " *I understand,"* she said. Then without another word, she vanished into the rain.

Just then, Fen heard a distant calling from where Rayquaza was falling. He stumbled back towards the dust and heard his own name. "Fen… Fen! FEN!"

Fen didn't want to risk his voice again, but he couldn't see Savi either. They ended up finding each other at the same time. "Here I-"

The dust turned his words into coughs almost immediately. Savi grinned, and wisely chose not to reply. Despite lying flat on his stomach, he didn't look in serious pain. Zephia too was no more hurt than before, but Fen's smile dropped at the reminder of Ryu, still unconscious, sprawled across her body.

Then there was Rayquaza in the centre of all of them. His eyes were very slightly open, but he didn't move. The end of his tail was bobbing in the sea, too long for the platform.

Fen turned behind him, just as a trio of pink, yellow and blue figures shimmered into view. The rain seemed to have driven some of the dust away now; they saw him at once.

"Oh my," Azelf murmured, as they flew towards them. "This will take some doing…"

"You *can* help him, can't you?" Savi asked.

Mesprit looked over Rayquaza, then addressed the Ivysaur. "We will manage, Savi, don't worry about that…" Her eyes were drawn to the 'mon Zephia held. "What happened to Ryu? Is he alive?"

Her fear and bluntness startled Fen. "He was tr-trying to heal Rayquaza himself," he said. "I pulled him away before he could… exhaust himself any more."

Mesprit hovered closely over him. "A heal pulse, hm… and he has never created one before…" She turned to Fen. "He merely seems to be in light sleep, nothing worse. You did well to stop him."

Fen was about to say, ' *it was only because Rayquaza told us to,'* but then Mesprit exclaimed again. "Zephia, your leg!"

Zephia looked down at it herself. "It does hurt," she confirmed. Her eyes narrowed. "Why are you worrying about me…?"

"I… right, of course," Mesprit said, seemingly flustered. She refocused on Rayquaza with her sisters, hovering over him. Fen noticed how much dimmer Mesprit's body was compared to the other guardians.

The three of them murmured some words in a language Fen didn't understand. Then as Mesprit stayed back, Uxie and Azelf flew lower until their hands were on the Dragon's head.

Their whole bodies started glowing yellow and blue respectively, and the auras seemed to melt into Rayquaza from their hands. At first

nothing seemed to happen. Then Fen noticed the guardians' bodies losing colour like Mesprit; and simultaneously Rayquaza was gaining it. His scales' green started to glow again, and his eyes opened wider, looking between the two tiny Pokémon with wonder.

Rayquaza lifted his body off the ground, but still they continued. Then they began straining; their bodies shook as they continued to pour energy into the Dragon, and Fen thought he even heard grunts of effort from them. Mesprit flew forward and put her hands between them both, and her own pink glow joined the fading others.

The yellow marks on Rayquaza's scales started crackling. The wings on his head became sharper and longer. He suddenly spat a single word. "STOP!"

Mesprit, Uxie and Azelf had just enough time to disconnect themselves before Rayquaza flung himself upwards from them. Uxie and Azelf fell all the way to the ground and stayed there, and while Mesprit fell too, she could still stand.

"Guardians!" Rayquaza's voice was suddenly a notch deeper and stronger than it had ever been. The slowness of his speech suggested he was quite unused to it too.

He looked to address the three guardians, but upon seeing the states of Uxie and Azelf, focused solely on Mesprit. "What you have done is a debt that I will never be able to repay you for, and that shames me. It was a long time ago that I cast you away from me, and now I see that I was wrong. So from this day, I will hold no barriers to you, nor any other of our kind. Hopefully that will prevent mistakes like mine ever being made again."

"Appreciated," Mesprit rasped, leaning heavily on some rubble.

Rayquaza turned to Fen, Savi, Zephia and Ryu. "You four may be mortals, but your actions today were of a bravery and determination that I had not seen in many eons… for that, all I can give is my admiration. Given how catastrophic my intervention on your kind

almost was, I will leave your fates to yourselves from now." He gave Fen a glance. "But I hope humanity will learn as much from this as you believe, Fen."

Then he addressed them all. "You cannot stay here. I can take you to whichever safe place you like. Kyunn is your home, yes?"

"No!" Mesprit said at once. "Take us directly north, to the edge of Hoenn."

"W-what?" Savi said. "Mesprit, why would-"

"Savi, listen to me," Mesprit said. Despite her weakness, and how much it pained her to speak, her voice had a steeliness to it. "Rayquaza, there will be a Salamence and Floatzel on the beach. Land us as close to them as you can."

The words were such a surprise that it took Fen a moment to make sense of them. His heart filled with elation. Savi's expression, and even the little smile Zephia wore told the same story. *They're alive…*

"Very well," Rayquaza said.

He moved further from them, then the yellow sparks on his scales suddenly expanded into an explosion of light. When it cleared, the Dragon was unimaginably huge, practically the length of all of Sky Pillar. Ribbons of white light trailed from his head-wings, and his scales were patterned with such a dazzling array of black and gold that it would have taken hours to admire them properly.

He made a circular motion with his hands. "Gather here," he said. Now his words reverberated from every direction, rumbling like thunder.

"Wait!" Savi cried. "Rayquaza, can I… ask one more question?"

Rayquaza's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"You said you can see down below us… how is Kyunn? And Sanguin Town? The l-loved ones we have there, are they okay?"

Rayquaza gave him such a cynical look that Fen was worried for a crazy moment that he would change his mind again. "I do not have time-"

"I know," Mesprit wheezed. "Savi, Sanguin Town is a wreck, most of the north is, and many Pokémon are desperately hungry, or injured; but they are alive. And they will recover, now."

"How… how do you know this?" Savi stuttered.

Mesprit gestured to Azelf's body. "I sent her to look, while you were in the fortress. I was just as worried as you." She smiled grimly. "You were up there for almost a day, you know."

Zephia limped over to the position Rayquaza marked, Savi helped her take Ryu, Fen carried Uxie and Azelf, and Mesprit was already there.

Rayquaza picked them all up in some scoop of his arms. His hands closed, putting them in complete darkness, other than Fen's tail. "Brace yourselves," Rayquaza said. Then he moved.

With nothing to hold, they were thrown helplessly into the front of his grip, making a heap. But only for a second, after which they stopped moving just as suddenly, and fell backwards the other way.

"That was fast," Savi murmured, then made a wheezing sound that might have been a laugh. No-one had even had time to cry out.

Zephia groaned. "Does that bastard realise I've got a broken leg…?"

"Here," Rayquaza said above them. Fen heard the arms brush sand, then they gently opened.

In the lashing rain, the dim, grey sky, he would never forget looking up to the sight of Faoz, without her floatation sac, fur ragged from a

combination of starvation and sleep deprivation. She dropped to her knees, eyes welling up at once. Behind her, Shaice's wings had so many cuts around the edges that they were more akin to a pair of torn, broken kites than something that could lift a creature of his magnitude. But he smiled at them too, and his face at least was not so misshapen.

"All of you," Faoz gasped. "I… I never thought…" She stopped to wipe her eyes. "Oh, this is silly, isn't it? I've barely known you…"

Before anyone could reply, a crack behind Fen made them whip their heads around. Rayquaza flew like a green-and-gold lightning bolt. He stopped at two distant glows of red and blue in the sea, hovered above them, and roared.

In response, Groudon and Kyogre loosed torrents of fire and water into both sides of Rayquaza. So powerful were the attacks that Rayquaza disappeared from view. Fen found himself holding his breath as the two gods' attacks did not relent.

Then there was a flash of gold; the attacks broke off and Groudon and Kyogre recoiled a step. Rayquaza remained between them, but now his body radiated so much glowing energy that it barely resembled its serpentine shape. He lifted his ribbons of light into the air and brought his whole body down into the sea between the gods, making an explosion that swallowed all three Pokémon.

When the dazzling light cleared, Groudon and Kyogre were still standing, but the yellow energy glowing from them had vanished. Rayquaza made a gesture, and they obediently moved closer to the Dragon until his arms could grip them.

For one second, Rayquaza looked back across the sea to their watching party. Then, after checking he had Groudon and Kyogre under control, the three of them disappeared in one more flash of light.

The rain suddenly stopped, as if a tap had been pulled. Silence fell on them. It felt like the first time in weeks there had been one.

"Is Ryu okay?" Faoz asked, gesturing to his still-unconscious self. "It is Ryu, isn't it?"

"He is fine, yes," Mesprit said. "Just exhausted."

Faoz nodded, apparently undeterred by the Psychic 'mon's presence. "Zephia?" she asked next, in a tone that implied both ' *are you Zephia?'* and ' *are you alright?'*

"I got off lucky, Faoz," Zephia answered dismissively.

Then Faoz noticed, for they were easily missed in the dusk, Uxie and Azelf's bodies on the sand. "Are… are they-!"

"As with Ryu, my sisters will live, Faoz," Mesprit said.

Faoz allowed herself a smile. "I'm glad." She did not press them any further.

For some time they just laid there - Fen could not have said whether it was for 10 minutes, or several hours. The rain clouds cleared, and it became still and warm, a warmth that for once was not overwhelming. He slowly worked backwards from the last calendar date he remembered, eventually concluding that they were currently somewhere in June. Which meant this weather made perfect sense. At last.

"H-hello?"

The sound of an entirely new voice almost made Fen jump out of his skin. It belonged to a Manectric, though he nearly didn't recognise the species. The little fur still left on her stomach didn't hide any ribs, and her bony legs trembled as she stood.

As they turned simultaneously to her, she gasped and skittered backwards a few paces. But after none of them made a further

move, she swallowed and stepped closer again. "You… you're not… mad, are you…?" She hung onto the last words, as if afraid to even say them.

"I don't know about *mad,* " Faoz said, but paused - the Manectric whimpered the moment she spoke. When the Electric 'mon didn't move away further, Faoz smiled and added, "But we wouldn't ever think of attacking you, no."

The Manectric looked at her, still unsure. In reply, Faoz reached behind her back and pulled something from her tail. It was short but thick, had visible teeth marks in, and white fibres coming out from both ends. "Chew on this," she said. "It's not food, but it'll help you."

"She is right," Mesprit added, at the Electric 'mon's hesitation. The Manectric's eyes widened at the sight of such a small, odd-looking Pokémon, but after a moment's more thinking, she leant over Faoz and picked up the root in her mouth.

Fen had no idea what it was, but despite it not giving an inch under the Manectric's gnawing, her shoulders seemed to loosen at the action. "What's your name, Manectric?" Fen asked.

She paused chewing. "Manectric."

Fen frowned. "Trainer's name?"

Manectric looked at him a little oddly, but nodded.

Fen understood; not everyone gave names to their Pokémon. He spoke carefully. "Manectric, were *you…* 'mad', before just now?"

"You mean, before *that* happened?" Manectric gestured out to sea.

"You saw that?"

Manectric gave him a shaky smile. "It was Rayquaza, wasn't it?"

"I… yes," Fen said, then added, "we think so." Manectric seemed unaware of the role they had played in Rayquaza's intervention. It seemed easier to keep things that way.

Manectric nodded. "Well… I know I hadn't been myself. The ground has been so unstable all the time, I've hardly been able to move for…" She paused, then shook her head. "I don't know. I was playing dead, because there was nothing else I could do… but when I heard a roar coming from this way, something told me I needed to see it, despite how awful I felt, so I got myself up and…" She looked helplessly at Fen, tears in her eyes, as if it were impossible to explain. "I feel better now than I have in so many days… even given the hunger…"

Fen's heart leapt. *She's really back to normal.* "Don't worry, you're safe now," he said. "We all are."

Manectric gave him a curious look, but as she opened her mouth something caught her eye behind him. "Tales?" she gasped, barely audible. Then she bounded past them. "Ninetales!"

A golden-coloured Pokémon was standing a few metres away. Though as ragged in fur as the Electric 'mon, he looked a little healthier than her. At the sound of Manectric's voice, he growled and spun around to them, fire already gathering in his mouth. Savi yelped in fear, and Fen's heartrate tripled.

But then Ninetales' eyes found Manectric. The fire disappeared, and his whole body shuddered for a moment. "Manectric," he said, as if he couldn't believe it. He shook his head. "Manectric, I… gods, I am so sorry… what happened to you?"

"I could ask the same," Manectric said, her voice cracking with emotion and laughter. "Where have you been?"

Ninetales choked out a laugh of his own. "Never mind that," he said. The two of them walked a little to reach each other. Ninetales gave their group a cautious look for a moment, but it softened when he

turned back to Manectric, and the two of them suddenly slumped onto the sand, embracing each other.

It wasn't just them. Up and down the beach, though it was only a smattering, there were Pokémon. Some stood alone, some furtively exchanged words with each other, and others still were clumsily embracing, just as the two 'mon before had. All appeared quite stunned to be there, and many were looking disturbingly at the wreckage of the city they had left. But none of them fought.

For so long they had been battling wearily against the weather, against other Pokémon, against the threat of starvation, that Fen had barely considered what the true goal of this had been, the one thing that mattered above everything. But now, watching this scene of dozens of different species, he understood. Pokémon could regain control of themselves. It was a beautiful sight.

His thoughts were distracted by a rustling of fur. Ryu propped himself up in the sand, blinking sleepily.

"W-what happened?" he mumbled. He looked dimly around at Fen, then to the vast, now empty sea, then at Faoz and Shaice. He did this several times, as if trying in vain to make sense of it.

"Did we… do it?" he asked finally.

Fen couldn't suppress a grin, such was his relief to see the Lucario awake. "Yeah," he said. "Rayquaza's calmed Groudon and Kyogre. Everything's stable again."

Ryu remembered nothing of the events after his own intervention on Rayquaza, so they relayed the crucial details to him. He couldn't hide his envy at having missed so much.

Later, Faoz explained how she and Shaice had stayed alive, with a significant help from the roots she had found underwater in a lake. Hoenn's other Water Pokémon had been apparently unaware of their healing benefits when chewed, but she remembered them from an

adventure with Shaice many moons ago. It meant that when Uxie had met them the previous day, while Fen's party were in the fortress, they were already well enough to fly to Lilycove.

The rest of their day was spent entirely on the beach, and many of Lilycove's Pokémon had the same idea, though they kept peacefully to themselves. As the day wore into night however, a different, new thought entered Fen's head. It was a simple one, but the doubt and worry it created grew so quickly that he soon felt no happiness at all for what they had done. When Faoz raised the idea of leaving Hoenn in the morning after a good rest, which was quickly agreed upon, the worry only intensified. He was glad for the darkness around them, preventing anyone seeing him and asking what was wrong. He curled up to sleep as soon as it was acceptable.

Because in stopping Groudon and Kyogre, they had achieved what he'd been striving for almost from the moment he'd woken up in Cheri Forest. From before he'd known anything about himself, or Mesprit, or even Hoenn. Now, it was all over. That left only one question.

What now?

Farewell

When Fen woke, the sun had just risen over the calm sea. He was for once glad at how exhausted his body had been, making it impossible for him to stay awake all night thinking. Though judging by the early hour, and the lack of movement from the few dozen other sleeping Pokémon close-by, this had only worked partially.

He glanced at Mesprit, who was wrapped around Uxie and Azelf in a small bundle. "Mesprit?" he ventured quietly.

Her eyes opened at once, though only a little. "Good morning, Fen."

"Could we talk? Somewhere away from here… where we won't be overheard."

"Certainly." Mesprit unwound herself, then somehow picked up both sisters in her tiny hands. She gestured him forwards. "You know this city better than I."

Fen felt too weary to go far. Both his body and mind were slow and heavy today, as if wading through mud. He walked around the beach's perimeter, so he would be on the other side of Ryu and the others, then stopped at a ledge. It overlooked the beach and gave a good view of the opposite end of the city. What *had* been the city.

"What did you wish to discuss?" Mesprit asked. She also sat down on the ledge, rather than stay in the air, which he found vaguely surprising.

"What I'm supposed to do now," Fen said. "I thought you'd be the best to ask."

Mesprit nodded solemnly. "Take your time."

Fen rubbed his face. For all his thinking, he hardly knew where to begin. "There's a few things I'm worried about. Rayquaza, for one… now we know that he was the one who woke Groudon and Kyogre, and he did it because he was so angry with how humans were attempting to use them, and for their greed and cruelty…"

He paused, noticing the surprise on Mesprit's face. "I did not know this," she said. "He told you while you were in the sky?"

"Yeah. But here's-"

"Could you-?"

They both stopped, interrupting each other. "Please, go on," Mesprit said, apologetic.

"The problem," Fen continued, "is that unless I do something now, no human is ever going to know that. I would hope that what's happened has taught humans not to be so reckless with the power they have… but what if it hasn't? What if they don't learn anything, and it leads to another event like this, with another legendary Pokémon?"

"I understand your concern," Mesprit said. "Yet you say, 'unless *I* do something' . Why must it be you?"

This, Fen was sure of. "Because I can talk to humans. Only through writing, but I'm still the only one from our party that can communicate at all. I don't know another Pokémon *anywhere* who can do it." He frowned. "Only… I'm not sure I could make it work. Even if I'm holding some paper saying ' *look, I can speak to you, you need to listen to me'*, who's to say a human won't just ignore it and… well, throw me in with every other Pokémon here, whatever happens to them-"

"Fen." Mesprit's voice was stern, but kind. Her expression reflected the same. "To pass on Rayquaza's message, all on your own… it is a huge responsibility you wish to take on. It makes me proud that

you want to do it, after all you have managed already, but this time, I swear you will not have to. You are not, in fact, the only Pokémon that speaks the human language."

Fen was taken aback. "Then… who?"

"There are two Pokémon I know, Latias and Latios. They understand and can speak the human language, *truly* speak it, like humans can. Humans will listen to them. Have you heard of these Pokémon?"

"I… yes," Fen said. "I didn't know if they were real, though…"

Mesprit's eyelids wrinkled as she smiled. "If Pokémon of our kind have anything in common, it is that we are good at going unseen."

"Do you know where they are, then?"

"Not right now," Mesprit said, looking up to the sky. "But I can find them, and pass on Rayquaza's message."

"I see," Fen said slowly. "But, Mesprit, if you do this…" He paused, wondering if it was even worth asking, given their telepathic link was broken. "Will we ever see each other again?"

"No." Mesprit bowed her head. "Once I lose sight of you here, there is no means for us to ever meet. Though this would happen in any case, for I must leave soon to find a safe space for Uxie and Azelf to recover."

Fen felt like she was still foregoing the most obvious reason; that she was a legendary Pokémon, only even seen a tiny number. Regardless of what had brought them together, she belonged in a different world to him.

"What would the safe space be?" he asked.

"My lake." Mesprit smiled. "Don't worry, it is extraordinarily difficult to discover, and I will cast protective wards there just in case. Once my

sisters are there, I can seek out Latias and Latios. Does that sound agreeable?"

Fen nodded slowly. "I suppose."

"Good. So, what was it that Rayquaza told you?"

Fen realised then that whatever he said could hold enormous power. He could state that humans were forbidden from keeping Pokémon in poké balls, from mass-breeding for competitive trainers, from capturing lone wild species for investigation… all the things he had despised about the way his world was run. For a moment, the thought tempted him.

But he couldn't do it. He was only one person, and not one deserving of any kind of authority. He had no idea what outlawing such major roots of human society would do to the world. It could cause even greater chaos than before; in which case his lies would be to blame. Mesprit was right - the last thing on earth he wanted right now was more responsibility.

So he only relayed what Rayquaza had actually said. There were no orders to humans to change their ways; only the hope that they would learn from the disaster that had occurred.

"Thank you," Mesprit said when he had finished. "I will pass this on. Was there anything else you needed?"

The lingering weight on Fen's shoulders returned. "There is one other thing," he said.

But as he contemplated how to explain it, he heard a familiar tapping of feet, and looked up. Ryu's head peered over their ledge. At first he gave a sigh of relief, but upon looking closer at Fen his brow furrowed in concern.

"I came looking as soon as I found you guys missing," he explained. "Why are you up here? Is everything alright?"

Fen and Mesprit exchanged a glance. "We were merely discussing something private," Mesprit said. "But-"

"Wait," Fen said. He hadn't anticipated being able to speak to Ryu alone about this. Now that the chance was here though, for all Mesprit's age and intelligence… Ryu was the *first* person he should be telling.

"Mesprit," he said, "would you mind… leaving us a moment?"

She had a sad, knowing look in her eyes; she understood exactly what this was about. "Of course," she said. "I will be at the beach, whenever you're ready to re-join us."

She lifted Uxie and Azelf into the air and glided gently back through the city. Ryu sat down in her place. Fen did not need to question how the Lucario had found him. Whether it was aura or some other power, Ryu just *knew.*

"You were up pretty early, 'mon," Ryu chirped. "If we still had places to walk, I'd be proud of ya." He looked out at the sea admiringly. "Picked a nice spot to sit, too."

Fen nodded absent-mindedly. Though he heard the words, he was thinking too much to give them any attention. He knew what he needed to tell Ryu, but couldn't summon the courage to drop it so suddenly. *Perhaps if I could ease into it…*

"Have you thought about what you'll do back on Kyunn?" he asked.

"A little, yeah." Ryu said. "I want to see my family, firstly. I hope our mountain's okay, but I'd like to think so; my dad's a smart 'mon. They must be crazy worried about me. Can't imagine how they'd react to seeing how much my ears have grown." He smiled, looking up thoughtfully. "Beyond that, helping repair some of the north's towns seems right, Sanguin especially. They'll be needing lots of Fighters, I s'pose. And it was fun chopping down trees that one time. You remember back then?"

"Yeah," Fen said, but it was a reflex response more than anything. This was the wrong question. He had to distance his mind from Kyunn. But how?

He looked at Ryu. The 'mon's expression screamed concern for him. Fen wasn't going to hide anything. *I have to do this now.*

"I need to tell you something, Ryu."

"Please do," Ryu said gently. "You look like you need to."

Fen tried to look him in the eyes, but couldn't manage it. So he gazed out to the endless water. "I'm not going back to Kyunn with you. I'm staying in Hoenn."

Ryu was silent for a moment. "Why are you staying?" he asked.

It wasn't the reaction Fen expected. Ryu's voice remained concerned and sympathetic, but not surprised in the slightest. *Did he know I'd say that?*

Fen considered Ryu's own question. He'd been thinking so much about passing on Rayquaza's message, he needed a moment to reformulate his answer. "I… have to stay," he began, then tried again. "Look, Kyunn is an amazing place. The time we spent there travelling, living in Sanguin Town, all of it… it's one of the best experiences of my life. But it's a place for Pokémon. And that's not who I am… not fully, anyway. I belong *here*, with humans.

"And I need to find my family. Or failing that, just my mum, wherever she is… I need to tell her that her son didn't die after all. Because that must be what she thinks. Perhaps she even saw it happen." A particularly big lump surfaced in his throat then, and he swallowed hard. "I love her too much to let that be. Even if I'm not exactly the same son she remembers… even if we can't speak properly, like I'd want to… I can't imagine how happy she'd be if she knew I was still here."

"How would you find her?" Ryu asked. "Just by writing human messages?"

"Something like that." Fen shrugged wearily. "I haven't worked out exactly how I'd do it yet."

They were silent for a long time. Fen still couldn't meet Ryu's eyes, so didn't know if the Lucario was trying to.

"I get why you want to stay," Ryu said at last. "And I agree. If that's how you feel, you shouldn't go back to Kyunn."

This time, Fen did look at him. "R-really?"

Ryu looked back and smiled. Fen had never seen anything so true. "Yeah. I'd love to help you find your mother."

Fen felt a huge thud of dismay, like a stone falling in his chest. Why had Ryu not understood him? Had he not been clear enough?

"I don't think you understand. I'll only find her if I stay here."

"I do understand," Ryu said, eyelids raised. "I'm gonna stay here with you."

… Oh, no. No, no, no.

Fen had expected, no, *known* for certain that Ryu would protest, perhaps even be angry with his decision. But not this. He waited for Ryu to say he was joking, but it didn't arrive. Every word in his head seemed to disappear. His mouth froze up.

"Fen…?" Ryu put an arm on his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Fen fumbled around for his tail. Concentrated on the heat. Took deep breaths.

"You can't stay."

Ryu was thrown for a few seconds. "What?" he said, sounding like he was about to laugh. "What are you talking about?"

"You… you can't stay!" Fen cried. "Think about it, Ryu! Your whole family is in Kyunn! You just said they'll be desperate to see you!"

"Well, okay, but even if I stayed, I'd be able to go back, right? Might take a few moons before we're settled here, but-"

"No, that won't work. Kyunn is totally isolated from the human world. And it's too far. No Pokémon or human would be willing to fly that far and back."

The only Pokémon who *might* have been willing was Shaice - but Faoz had told them last night that though the Salamence could take on their return trip to Kyunn, he wouldn't manage many more flights of that magnitude. His wings had been seriously damaged, and at his age they would never heal properly.

Ryu had heard this too, but still looked sceptical. "How do you know they wouldn't?"

"I just do!" Fen heard his voice crack, feeling tears well in his eyes. *Maybe it is possible,* he thought, *but it's so unlikely… Pokémon don't fly between these lands, and humans* definitely *don't… holding onto a hope like that would destroy you, Ryu. Destroy us both.*

"Okay," Ryu said slowly. "I believe you. It doesn't matter though."

"What? But you said you wanted to see your family-"

"Someone else can tell them," Ryu said. His voice had an icy determination. "I'll stay here regardless."

Fen was in disbelief. "Don't you care about them?"

He regretted the words immediately. Ryu's whole demeanour changed. He looked at Fen like he'd just been punched by him. Wounded. "Of course I do," he said quietly. "Surely you know that. I

would love to see them again, to tell them exactly how I finally evolved, to learn everything I can about aura…" He trailed off, sighing deeply. "But don't you see? I care about *you* more than any of that, Fen. I love my family, sure, but the time I've spent with you… it's been the best time of my life. I don't want that to end now. I want to stay with you. Even if that means leaving everything behind, I'll do it."

Every word stung Fen's heart more. He felt like it would burst with the emotions he was fighting to contain.

Even if that means leaving everything behind, I'll do it.

Ryu truly was a greater friend that he could have ever hoped for. Why did that have to cause him so much agony? He didn't think he would need to *convince* Ryu to go back home. But he had to try.

"Ryu, Hoenn is… not meant for you. You won't be able to run and explore how you want. It's designed by humans, run by humans. You won't be happy. Even with me."

"So?" Ryu said. His voice shook a little. "I won't be happy without you, either."

Fen shook his head despairingly. "There's more to it than that. Humanity will arrive here soon. I don't know what they'll do with all the stray Pokémon around. I'll write messages, and hope that they'll be noticed by a human, and hope that that will keep me safe. I would try to keep you with me. But it might not work. My messages could be ignored, and then… neither of our species are supposed to even *live* here, Ryu. We could be taken away and separated. Get put in poké balls before we ever have the chance to say goodbye."

He only realised when he paused how much he was shivering. "And if anything happened to you, it would be my fault! I'd never forgive myself! I won't let you get hurt, not after all you've done… you have to stay safe…"

Ryu hugged him before he could protest any more. But even this comfort failed to console him. He thought about how it might be the last time he ever felt this fur… heard this voice…

"I'm sorry, Fen," Ryu said. "But I won't let you do this alone."

"You have to leave!" Fen said again, though it was muffled into the Lucario's shoulder.

"Saying it more won't convince me." Ryu pulled his head away and put it to Fen's own. "Let me understand this. You don't want me to come with you, because there's a significant chance your own plan's not going to work. You'll just end up far from your mother, in a place with Pokémon or humans that you don't know… something like that, right?"

"It's different for me," Fen said. "As long as I can write, even if I'm not listened to immediately, I could…" But then he stopped, his brain suddenly awash with images. News headlines stating ' *Talking Pokémon in Hoenn'* ; videos of his writing being beamed all over the world; being some kind of Pokémon celebrity, or a circus act. He realised that he had almost no control over how he might be treated.

And what would happen if the truth about his past life came out? In the view of science, the strange hybrid of human and Pokémon that he occupied was completely unheard of, impossible. The world would be desperate to know what he was capable of, how he processed things. Forget the possibility of finding anyone he cared about; what if he was never given a moment's peace again?

The ideas were nightmarish; far worse than being left to fend for himself in the wild. It made him weep louder into Ryu's fur.

"See, this is why-" Ryu's voice quivered, and he started again. "I don't want to inflate my own importance at all, but…" He gave a muffled chuckle at himself. "I think about some of our experiences together. We've both had struggles. You with your memories, or the freezing cold… me with Ghosts, or facing my parents. You made me

strong, Fen. I wouldn't have achieved half of what I have without you by my side. And I think you feel the same. Which is why I can't bear the thought of you doing this alone. If this is really what you want, then let me come with you."

Fen felt the same way. He desperately did not want to abandon Ryu, nor Savi or even Zephia. But they had to leave Hoenn, and he had to stay. No solution would end happily.

… Or would it?

If I stay in Hoenn, he thought, *there's a very real possibility that it will go wrong. That one way or another, I'll be living the rest of my life in misery. But, if I went back to Kyunn…*

He could stay with Ryu as long as he wanted. Even if they parted, it would only be by a matter of miles, easily within reach. He would be surrounded by Pokémon who cared about him. He could explore, or fight, or sleep to his heart's content. There would be no humans to threaten him, ever. He had said it himself - his time in Kyunn was, looking back, some of the best of his life. *Either* life. Why had he wanted to escape it so badly?

There was a very simple reason. He would never see anyone from his human life again. The only life he had known for 19 years. But did that mean he could never belong in Kyunn? After all, staying on Hoenn would only have the opposite consequence. These Pokémon he'd met… they *were* as good as family now. His feelings about losing them was proof of that.

"Ryu," he said carefully. "Would you… still be open to going back to Kyunn?"

"What? No!" Ryu cried, despairing. "Mew, has nothing that I've said mattered? I won't leave you here-"

"Wait!" For a moment, Fen managed to smile at his confusion. "I meant… if *I* decided to go back to Kyunn."

Ryu stopped, then pulled away and looked at him. "Are you… are you being serious?"

"I don't know yet," Fen said. "It's… a thought."

Ryu nodded, then frowned. "What would you do about your mum and your family?"

"Well…" Fen looked up at the sea once more. It was frustratingly still. Some waves would have helped distract his mind a little. "I would never see them again. They would never hear from me. Instead of losing you, I'd lose them. It has to be one."

Ryu fiddled with the backs of his paws, as he always did when thinking. Since the metal bumps had grown to little spikes, this was now more difficult, and he seemed to have defaulted to simply rubbing them against each other.

"Maybe you could write a note to your mum," he said. "Then she would know you're alive, like you want, but you wouldn't have to face… everything that scares you here. I don't know how you could get it to her, though…"

Fen's mind got a spark. "Maybe if I left it at our house, addressed it to her… the house shouldn't get any more destroyed than it already is, now the weather's calm…"

"And the Pokémon are normal," Ryu added.

"And it'll be found by someone, assuming humanity doesn't abandon this whole city."

It was still far from a certainty that the letter would find its way to her. But it was *possible* . The odds didn't seem worse to if he was trying to find his mother himself.

"Would you like to know what I think?" Ryu said.

Fen didn't expect the question, but he nodded him on.

"You said that I've been through too much to suffer any more. I appreciate that… but really 'mon, it's *you* that's suffered the most. I've not had to adapt to a completely new body. I've not been woken up in the night, shaking and terrified because of a load of emotions hitting me. I didn't lose every memory about myself, travel halfway across the world to get them back, only to see…" Ryu's eyes flickered downwards. "… what you saw. What I'm saying is… you've been doing what you felt you *had* to do for such a long time, and it's hurt you. I know the pressure you've been under, because I felt it too.

"I think you feel like you *have* to stay here too, that you have some kinda responsibility to. But you don't. You've shouldered enough of that already. So if you have to choose now: choose what you think you really *want.* Above anything else. Please."

His words surprised Fen, more than anything. "Mesprit told me something similar about responsibility," he said.

"See?" Ryu said, eyes sparkling with joy. "And how long has she lived for? About… 50 units of eons, or something? She must know these things better than anyone!"

A unit of eon was such a ludicrous idea that, despite everything, Fen found himself laughing. That seemed to tip his mind's scales decisively. He knew what he would do.

"I'll go back with you, Ryu," he said, and stood up. It felt like a set of chains had been loosened from him, though some of their weight still lingered. "But-" he added, as the Lucario was about to possibly tackle him out of happiness, "I need to write this letter before anything else."

"Right! Right." Ryu stood up too. "What d'you need? Writing materials?"

"I…" Fen was about to say that he expected some paper and pens from his own house to still be intact, but he realised Ryu was merely

offering to accompany him. *He's still worried about me*…

"Let's see what we can find."

Zephia was well awake when Mesprit's glowing figure returned to them, along with the rather dimmer shapes of her sisters, whose names Zephia could not remember. Faoz, Shaice and Savi had woken more recently, and the Ivysaur was the first to ask Mesprit about their missing party.

"Fen and Ryu will return," Mesprit said coolly. She carefully placed her sisters' bodies on the ground below her. "Fen wished to discuss his plans for the future, and asked to do so in private."

Savi looked unsure. "What kind of plans?"

"I assume," Zephia said wearily, "he's deciding whether he wants to stay here, or come back to Kyunn with us."

Savi and Faoz eyed her curiously. Zephia fought off an urge to scowl back. "I only know because I had to do the same," she explained. "We're similar in that way. We both come from Hoenn."

"He's… going to come back, isn't he?" Savi asked, a hopeful tone to his voice.

"I don't know," Zephia said. Which was true.

"Should we help?" Faoz said. "Where are they?"

"Leave them," Savi said quickly. "Leave it to Ryu. He's the best for this."

Mesprit nodded - or rather, her whole body made a nodding movement - and she smiled. "I quite agree."

The group went silent. Zephia could recognise the uncertainty in the air. She saw Faoz look at her increasingly closely.

"Zephia," she said, "have *you* decided on this?"

"Yes," Zephia said at once. "And I'm going back with you."

"What, really?" Savi exclaimed.

She looked witheringly at him. "Yes? I may not love your island, but it's a million times better than here."

"But… what about your-"

"My parents are dead, Savi."

She watched the Ivysaur's face fall. "You… don't know that," he tried.

Zephia sighed. "If they're not, they're either on the verge of death, or hiding somewhere remote enough that I'll never find them. It's easier to think of them as dead than be hopeful." She glanced at her leg. "Plus, I don't think I'll be able to walk for a while, and I don't fancy sitting around where humans are about."

To that, Savi had no answer. He moved around sand in his paws anxiously. "I'm sorry," he said at last.

Zephia frowned at him. "Why would you be sorry?"

"Because… you've been trying to find them this whole time, haven't you? You went to all the efforts you did, and it wasn't enough…"

Zephia thought for a moment. "I suppose. But if I hadn't gone to those efforts, I wouldn't have come here, and I wouldn't have helped us save the world from some power-crazy god. So… I can't be *too* disappointed."

Saying it made her feel strangely proud. A feeling she had nearly forgotten existed. Savi seemed to think similarly, judging by his wide smile that appeared.

"And besides," Zephia added, "I've come to terms with what's happened."

The days spent away from these 'mon were what made her first realise what a fool she had been, chasing almost blindly after her parents' home. There had been an earthquake on the night she'd left, reducing most of The Cave, their tiny space included, to little more than rubble. Her parents wouldn't return there. Then the trial with Ryu, where she had fallen for the most shameful of tricks, had made her mind up for good. It was time to move on.

"So, if you're staying with us, what are your plans for Kyunn, Zephia?" Faoz asked.

"I don't know," Zephia said, again, honestly. "Kyunn might not have humans, but it's pretty cold and harsh to live in. I wouldn't have to hide, but it would still be difficult." She shook her head. "I don't know what's up with me. Before I would have relished *difficult.* I just don't feel like doing it anymore."

"There's nothing *up with you*, Zephia!" Faoz exclaimed. She moved away from Shaice and towards her, sitting a couple of feet away, which was about as close as Zephia would have liked. Faoz examined her, and tried to hide a gasp of shock, rather unsubtly. "Sweet heavens of Arceus, you look awful… have you slept much the past few days?"

Zephia looked dimly at her. "Why don't you ask Savi if he's been breathing any fire recently?" Faoz looked rather deflated at that, and Zephia realised she was being a little rude, so added, "I've been travelling on my own, mostly, so the time I would've tried to sleep was taken up by keeping watch. But I hardly sleep anyway. The answer's always 'no'."

Faoz nodded. She shifted a little, and Zephia was expecting a paw or some other affectionate contact, but Faoz didn't move. *She at least understands,* Zephia thought. *Better than most of the others.*

"What you were saying about Kyunn," Faoz said. "Why would it be cold and harsh? The weather should be normal again."

"But… that mountain with the other Darks," Zephia said slowly, confused. "It *was* cold, I remember."

"Wait… Glyciak?" Faoz said, her features curving into a grin. She started laughing. "Oh, my girl, you don't *have* to live in Glyciak if you don't want to! In the north we take every kind of Pokémon there is! The weather's much nicer too. Probably why it's so popular there."

"But…" Zephia stopped, trying to understand what she meant. "How would I live there?"

"You'd probably want to either stay with someone or get a house of your own," Faoz said. "I have no idea what Sanguin Town looks like now, so those plans may have to wait until we find out. But hey, as long as I can manage it, I'm happy to provide what food you need while you enjoy the sun and get a well-deserved rest."

"We have shops, too," Savi added. "You could probably find whatever you wanted without even leaving the town."

Zephia shook her head. "I'm not sure you get it. Even *if* I could use a rest for a little while… what then? I won't be able to sit around all day. I've not wanted to do that once in my life."

"Oh, I agree." Faoz smiled. "That's what jobs are for."

Zephia gave her a puzzled look. "Jobs," she repeated. "What… kind of jobs?"

"Lots," Faoz said, which didn't help. "For example, I run a request board for 'mon needing errands, and give 'mon meals and a place to sleep in exchange for them taking on those errands…" She paused. "Plus organising all the requests, and the cooks, and… some other things."

Savi continued. "You also have 'mon that build houses, store things, look after hatchlings…" His eyes suddenly lit up. "Wait, Zephia, I think I know the perfect job for you!"

"Really?" she said wearily. The Grass 'mon's excitement was exhausting, sometimes.

"Because Sanguin Town is so big, and so many 'mon pass through, there's occasionally ones who… don't like to do things fairly," Savi said. "There's a few 'mon who take care of crooks like that. Taluk, this Electabuzz, he…" He stopped. "I… think you might have already met, actually."

It took Zephia a moment to figure what he was talking about. "That Electric 'mon who thought he could catch me in a wood?"

"After you attacked Fen," Savi added.

"I remember." It was odd to think about now. "You're saying that's something I could do? Catch Pokémon who don't behave right?"

"Certainly," Faoz said, beaming. "As soon as your leg's recovered, of course. You'd be qualified enough; if anything, toning *down* your usual fighting style might be more appropriate, given we're in a busy town and folk don't wanna see 'mon bleeding out on the streets… but that's easily manageable."

It did sound quite impossibly appealing. Was she hearing them correctly? A position where she not only had license to rip into any law-breaking Pokémon she liked, but essentially got free food, shelter and whatever else she needed directly as a result. As she heard Faoz's last words, though, her enthusiasm dimmed.

"How…" She paused, feeling her face heat up. She looked at the floor. "How 'busy' is this town, exactly? Is it crowded?"

"Can be, if the weather's nice," Faoz said, then she exclaimed suddenly. "Oh! You… don't like crowds, Zephia?"

She glared at the Floatzel, both stunned and offended. "How the hell could you have guessed that?"

"I've known a fair few Darks," Faoz said apologetically. Zephia's sudden aggression didn't seem to alarm her. "It's fairly common amongst your lot."

"Right…" Zephia sighed. *Fair enough* . "I never have. They make me feel like I'm in danger, or something."

"It's understandable," Faoz said. "But you can manage. The key is just getting accustomed to it. I can lend you a paw with that, if you like."

Zephia could only frown in response. The suggestion didn't fill her with much joy.

"I think they have night workers for the security, anyway," Savi said. He raised an eyebrow. "You… *are* nocturnal, aren't you?"

Sometimes, Zephia could avoid being irritated with Savi's timid politeness and merely find it amusing. Such was the case here. She smirked. "I prefer the dark, yes."

"Ah, that's excellent," Faoz said, clapping her paws together. "You'd be fantastic working there."

"I never *said* that I'd do it," Zephia said pointedly.

"Oh, absolutely," Faoz said cheerfully. "But will you think about it, at least?"

Zephia sighed again. "Fine."

She still felt uncertainty in her bones, like when she could sense a Pokémon nearby without a clear sight of it. *But think about what you* know*,* she told herself. *You're going to a safer place. You won't spend dawn till dusk just looking for a way to stay satiated.* She

glanced at the pair of them again. *And there'll be Pokémon there that actually care for me. I didn't think I'd find many of those.*

The thought of Glyciak still sent a shiver through her veins, despite everything. It was a challenge that she refused to ignore. *I'll go there one day, once I have a hunger for it*, she thought. *Just not right now.*

She tuned back into the Ivysaur and Floatzel's chatter, which had apparently continued without her.

"… do you feel like you can organise it all again?" Savi was asking. "It'll be chaos, won't it? Was chaos even before we left…"

"Aye, I'm sure it will be," Faoz said. She suddenly looked downbeat, and the bright sunlight laid bare her face's tired features. "Which reminds me. I've had time to do a lot of thinking. Shaice and I have both seen our fair share of adventures and hard work. You're probably right in that the guild can only get busier." She paused. "And… I must take better care of Buin than I have been."

Savi frowned. "Sure, but… you can't close the guild down? It was doing so well…"

"I'm not suggesting that," Faoz said. "Merely that it'll need some fresh paws to help me if it's going to continue." A wry smile crept across her face. "Fresh vines, even."

Savi's mouth hung open as he realised. Faoz nodded knowingly at him, but he exclaimed, "I can't take your job, Faoz!"

"Why not?" Faoz said. "You've shown that you can handle yourself in some of the toughest environments I've ever known. There aren't many 'mon in Sanguin Town who can claim the same."

"But… I don't know half of what you actually *do* -"

"Which is fine. You won't have to take over *immediately.* " Faoz grinned at him. "I'll give you all the tools and information you need. I

believe you know Kyunn pretty well already, so that's one step done."

"Well… the north, maybe," Savi said.

"Which is really all you *need* to know," Faoz said.

Still, Savi shook his head. "But I'm not… a leader like you are. You command who knows how many 'mon every day, and keep track of so many things… I couldn't do that."

"It's not an impossible job, Savi," Faoz said. "Let me put this another way. If you *felt* this job was within your abilities, would you want to take it?"

Savi hesitated, as if trying to decipher some hidden meaning to the question. "Yes, I suppose," he said eventually. "I'd be honoured to."

"Then I'll tell you something." Faoz leant closer to him. "Leadership is not something any of us are born with. Everyone starts from zero. I doubt that anyone with no experience, even the proudest Fire in the world - and I don't mean Fen, by the way - could say with complete assurance that they're 'ready' to take on a role like this.

"The thing is… you're never ready. There are always situations that can throw you. I'm well aware of this. The only thing you are missing, Savi, is confidence. Once you have that, the pieces will fall into place easier than you imagine."

Still Savi looked hesitant. He glanced at Zephia and back to the Floatzel. "Can I say that I'll think about it, too?"

Faoz laughed. "That's good enough for me."

Fen read over the letter again. He had written so many attempts at it now, used the same words in so many different sequences, that they

had almost stopped resembling any sort of language. But this one, he felt, was okay. It was good enough.

He had realised that, when he only had one chance to say final words to all the family and friends he had ever known, writing the perfect message was impossible. There were too many things to say. He wanted to thank his mother for just about everything, but particularly for keeping him on his feet in his last two years of this life, where his sadness with the world around him had grown deepest. He wanted to apologise to many people, particularly his brother, to whom he had been so stubborn and spiky about his desires to be a trainer; really, he greatly admired Stefan's ambition, and that was never something he had found in himself. Apologies to his father, too, for growing so distant with him, and to the friends that he had broken off with so suddenly, without explanation, when it had only made him feel worse, and surely caused the same in them.

Yet every approach to writing he tried seemed to cut out some people in favour of others, or read too coldly, or somehow seem like he was trying too hard. It had also made him question, over and over, whether leaving this world really was the right choice. He suspected the question would never be fully resolved.

What he had ended up with was just a handful of lines in length, short and to the point. It would have to do. He made sure his hand wasn't shaking, as a few letters had already been ruined that way, then wrote the final words.

From your son,

Blake.

As he was about to fold the page in half, he lingered on the last word. *Goodbye, Blake,* he thought.

He carefully folded the paper and addressed it to his mother and their house's address, in case it got lost. Then, standing up from the chair at his desk, he gave his bedroom one more look. But for a

couple of holes in the walls, it had remained remarkably intact. The desk itself was still a complete mess of textbooks and notes, except a singular tidy spot on the right where Cubbs would sit, or lie, depending on the hour. He had considered taking the photo of the two of them and his mother with him to Kyunn, as a kind of memento, but decided against it. If he was leaving this behind, it had to be absolute. A reminder like that would only grief him more.

One element he had forgotten was the posters on his walls, all taken from a nature magazine he had liked. They combined natural scenery, such as the magma-filled depths of Kanto's Mt. Ember, or a stalactite-filled underground cave in Sinnoh, with action shots of some of the area's native Pokémon. He had never been able to visit any of those places; either they were too expensive, or too dangerous, or required a level of training that no 19-year-old who still needed to pass exams would be able to even start.

At least I won't be losing out on that, he thought, thinking of the numerous stunning landscapes in Kyunn that he and Ryu had merely happened across on their way to Darkrai's Knot. The thought did little to cheer him, but he clung to it regardless.

At last, he felt prepared to leave the house behind. Ryu was sitting just outside the porch as he emerged. He smiled warmly and glanced at the paper in hand. "Is that the one?"

Ryu had waited hours for him, yet still looked as pleased as ever to see him at the end. Fen could find no more words for his appreciation. "It's the one," he said.

He stuck the letter on the front door of the house with sticky tape. Fen didn't find any in his own house, so a little scavenging had been needed. When he described the concept of sticky tape to Ryu, the Lucario had dug up a dozen different spherical items from houses in a matter of minutes before hitting the mark.

Ryu's amazement at watching it work was quite amusing, too. "How is it only sticky on *one side* ?" he had asked. "How? How is that

possible?"

After the letter was secured, there was nothing left to do. They did not rush the walk back to the beach. Ryu asked no questions about what had taken him so long in the house, or about how the fur on both sides of his face had gotten sticky with persistent tears. Which was just as Fen wanted. The Lucario understood him on such an acute level.

Zephia was the first to notice them approach. Savi and Faoz spun around at once, but they looked terribly worried until Ryu spoke.

"We're going to Kyunn," he said. Fen could see all the 'mon's tensions disappear into the air, their bodies relaxing.

"So are we," Faoz said, grinning. "Are we all ready to leave, then?"

The question was met with murmured approval. Then everyone's eyes drifted towards Mesprit. She smiled.

"This is goodbye, then," she said, floating upwards to reach their height. "Even after all this time, I have never been one for speeches… alas. It was an honour and a privilege to have known and assisted you all. I wish you the very best in whatever you do."

"Mesprit!" Fen said. He suddenly realised how much he didn't want her to leave. She felt like a part of him, which she was, in a way. "I… I'll never be able to thank you properly. Not just for protecting me, but for everything you've done for us…"

"Dear Fen," Mesprit said, eyes glinting. "I did not go into Rayquaza's fortress with you, did I? It was *your* party that saved this world from destruction, not me. You have thanked me more than enough."

Mesprit held out a tiny hand to him, and Fen took it in his own.

"Goodbye," he murmured. "And… good luck."

Mesprit smiled at him for a long second. Then she picked up Uxie and Azelf in her arms, and with a final nod to them all, they vanished into the air.

As Zephia was helped onto Shaice's back by Faoz, Ryu caught her eye. She raised her eyelids at him in response.

"I… didn't think you would go back," Ryu said.

She huffed. "For a long time, neither did I. Are you disappointed?"

Ryu grinned. "Only a little."

As Zephia turned her muzzle up to that comment, she seemed to notice Fen standing next to Ryu. She muttered something to Faoz, then jumped off Shaice's back in front of him.

"How are you feeling?" she asked quietly.

Fen blinked at her, so unexpected was the question. "Um… not great," he murmured.

She nodded, crouching slightly so she met him at eye level. "I know how much it hurts right now," she said, "but it'll get better with time, I promise. You've just gotta keep going until then."

"I will," Fen said, doing his best to hold her gaze.

She paused briefly, then smiled and clapped a paw on his shoulder. "Yeah, I know you will. Now, c'mon."

Shaice needed several metres' run up to take off, and his stampede down the beach naturally drew all kinds of attention. Ryu, Savi and Faoz laughed and waved to the astonished Pokémon, while Zephia did nothing. Fen could only wonder what would happen to those Pokémon once humanity returned.

Ryu then asked what everyone's plans were back on Kyunn, which led to him playfully egging on Savi to take Faoz's job, while Savi

fumbled with excuses on why he wasn't sure about it. Still Fen said very little. He watched Hoenn from Shaice's back until the last speck of beach had faded into the sea.

Some part of him told him to focus on the now. On the practical miracle they'd achieved in stopping Groudon and Kyogre, or the friends he rode with, the most incredible friends he had ever known, who had dragged themselves through so much for their cause.

But as the sky dimmed and Shaice kept flying into the night, all he could do was think about everything he was leaving behind. And hope, beyond anything in the world, that his letter would fall into the right hands.

The End

Author's Note

Hello! This is just a little note to say some thank you's, talk a little bit about this story, things I've learnt, and what's next for me personally. It will naturally contain spoilers, so please do not read unless you're prepared (which, considering where this note is, you really should be…)!

Before I say anything else: yes, that is the end. Fen and co. shall remain on Shaice's back, flying into the horizon, for eternity (heh). Really though, I know there's plenty more that these characters could do in Kyunn, but a story's gotta end somewhere, and this was always planned to be the time for mine.

It feels very strange to be talking in my own voice for once. I thought that after the almost endless stream of false starts and revisions that writing *Fractured Elements* sometimes was, this personal message would be a nice, gentle way to finish. Yet this is about the fifth different opening I've tried. I guess some things never change.

Anyway, the most important thing I'd like to do in this note is give acknowledgement to those who have contributed to the story:

- Thanks to Will1231, for being my beta reader and main story advisor for well over 18 months now, going all the way back to chapter 5, where little Fen was still trying to learn how to breathe fire… Wow. And for being a truly incredible friend throughout all this. You're a hero, man.

- Thanks to Talgoran, whose story *Power Trip* is where *Fractured Elements* drew much of its early inspiration. And for then going on to give amazing feedback for every chapter, and being another fantastic source of help when I've really needed it. If you've read this story, perhaps are itching for more PMD in your life, and have not

read *Power Trip,* then I suggest you do so right now! (Unless you'd like to finish this note first.)

- Thanks to Namohysip and Zion of Arcadia for both being fantastic reviewers and yet more sources of help. And thanks to anyone else reading who has given me any kind of feedback along the way. Until writing this, I had no idea how much of an impact reviews would have on me. There's something about writing - maybe the fact that it's *just* your own words, and nothing else, laid bare on a page - that makes hearing and talking to other people about those words so special.

- Thanks to the artists that helped bring my story to life! I love Pokémon fanart a crazy amount, so these mean so much. Unfortunately, FFN doesn't let me post the complete links to their works, but if you go the deviantart homepage, then add in what I *can* post of the links, you'll be good! They are:

Amaryllis, whose work is the story's cover art, capturing Fen and Ryu looking out over Kyunn, near the start of their journey to Darkrai's Knot. The little box FFN gives you really doesn't do this piece justice. (And bonus points if you recognise Arkan in there!) /amaryllisno/art/Cynsh-Commission-805058788

Woo, who drew Fen and Ryu posing awkwardly and adorably on a mountain: /wooled/art/CM-Mountain-Exploration-730115796

AarowTheBlacksmith, who drew everyone's favourite grumpy Zorua: /aarowtheblacksmith/art/Zephia-781892757

- Thanks to Spike Chunsoft and everyone involved in making the PMD games - and a special mention to Arata Iiyoshi, composer of Rescue Team and Explorers' soundtracks, which will remain in my heart forever (I still have to ration myself to listens of *Don't Ever Forget*, else it might lose its magic). It is no exaggeration to say that these games have changed my life; they've probably played a large part in making me who I am today. It was because of them that I wrote this story, and every experience that came with it. Even though

I'm sure Spike Chunsoft will never see this note, I must say how grateful I am to them. *Yoom-tah* !

- Thanks to Bulbapedia for being an amazing resource of information! I have looked up just about every Pokémon that has played any kind of role in the story. It's been particularly helpful in two ways: 1) knowing how to precisely describe a Pokémon's biology, and 2) finding how a certain move has been depicted in the anime or manga, giving me something to base my own description off… even if I sometimes went against those anyway.

- And thanks to *you*, reader, whoever you are, whether you've been following this story's updates for a considerable time, or have just binge-read it all (… maybe? Is that even possible?). Either way, you've somehow been willing to read about two-hundred thousand words of my brain's rambling, which I find pretty mind-blowing, so um, yeah, I basically love you a bit.

The Birth of *Fractured Elements*

How did all of this come about? Well, I can think back to early 2016, when I was looking for something new to do. For some reason I remembered the Pokémon Mystery Dungeon series, which I hadn't picked up at all since I was a kid. I downloaded a ROM of Red Rescue Team, and… I absolutely loved it. Then I played Explorers of Sky. Twice, in fact; after playing it on an emulator, I decided it deserved a physical copy too.

Explorers of Sky… left such an impression on me. I was still thinking about it for days, weeks afterwards. In what was a rather difficult time in my life, its world was, and still is, a source of comfort and joy that is unrivalled. In 2017, I bought Super Mystery Dungeon, and that too stayed with me for some time. In short, then, I was obsessed with this world these games created.

Soon after playing Super, I discovered PMD fanfiction. Two stories that I was quickly inspired by were the aforementioned *Power Trip,*

and ScytheRider's *Silver Resistance.* I had written some little stories throughout my childhood (including some actual PMD fanfiction, unbelievably), but had never had much of urge to write since. *This*, though, was different. I loved the idea of writing my own PMD adventure *so* much, and so it was that *Fractured Elements* started being thought out in summer 2017.

If you know much about the mainline Pokémon games, you probably gathered that one of those generations had a significant influence on the story too. I love Pokémon Emerald perhaps equally as much as Sky; and while Sky was a game I only properly discovered long after its release, Emerald was the one I truly grew up with. I'm so happy that I could create something unique with both sets of games.

When I first started putting words down, I had no idea that this story would consume so much of the next two years of my life. That it would bring me into such an incredible community, where I've made some of the best friends I've ever known. That I would be left both smiling like an idiot and with tears in my eyes at some of my own scenes. It really has been an experience unlike anything before, and one that I'll never forget.

(I'll stop trying to be poetic now.)

Naturally, I learnt a lot about writing in these two years. To go into specific tips and techniques would perhaps be a little dry, so here are the two biggest, and probably most important pieces of advice I can give :

- Planning a story - *especially* one the length of a fantasy epic, as this turned out to be - is extremely important. That may sound obvious, but the naïve me of 2017 was far too excited to *start* writing it all to get bogged down in that boring stuff. I thought that, while I had these vague plot points for the story in mind and little else, as long as I kept writing everything would work itself out! The whole story almost collapsed very early on because of this. I had a few similar, though not quite so severe, moments like that throughout

writing, and I must again pay tribute to Will and Talgoran, without whom I'm not sure how I would have overcome those obstacles. Different people like to plan in varying detail, which is fine, but whatever you do, don't neglect it!

- Don't get hung up on reviews. While it's often very difficult to judge the quality of your own work, and I'm sure everyone's aware that 'nothing is perfect' - it's easy to think, as I did in the beginning, that what I was writing was actually really good! Unsurprisingly, it wasn't - there were numerous problems, some of them rather basic. While I was very fortunate to get feedback pointing some of these faults out, it was tough to stomach at the time. The toughest criticisms are ones that *I*, looking back, fully agree with. Because there's nowhere to hide then - all you can say is 'yeah, I was wrong', and that hurts!

There's two things I can say to this. Firstly, the most important thing about criticism is that you learn from it. That's what's so great about it! You should *definitely* not be put off by criticism, or worry about making mistakes, because everyone makes them.

Secondly, I find that it helps to look at the bigger picture, and if ever you feel like this with criticism too (it doesn't even have to be writing, but art, music - whatever!), I advise you to do likewise. That is: yeah, what you've done may have flaws x and y. But you've still *written* it. You've still put the effort in and produced something that you're clearly passionate about, out of your own free time. *That*, I think, can and should always be celebrated, regardless of what anyone says.

Now, it's time for what you've definitely all been waiting for: *Fractured Elements* trivia!

I consciously avoided writing using several words/phrases throughout the story. These include:

- Never describing Fen as 'the Chimchar/Monferno' or 'the Pokémon' while the story was in his point-of-view - which is for the vast majority

of it. Since Fen himself is always aware of his human status, such a description would feel odd to me.

- Pokémon are not so attentive to time periods as us humans, so measurements such as 'minutes', 'hours' and 'years' were never used by them - except for Fen, of course. 'Days' was an exception used by everyone.

- Never using the word 'animal' in any form. Because in this world, Pokémon *are* the animals. (Though, as was once pointed out to me, that leaves a few questions relating to how things would decompose without flies, etc. I have no answer to this. I'm sorry.) This also goes for describing Fen as 'a monkey', or Faoz as 'an otter', for example. It's lucky that 'Dragon'-types *do* exist in this world, eh?

- *Trying* to avoid Pokémon using very human idioms - I may have slipped once or twice here, though. And adding some (sometimes subtle) confusion on a 'mon's part when Fen comes out with one of them!

In Hoenn, going by the original games, no Pokémon beyond generation 3 can be found. Hence, Fen could usually recall the names of all native Hoenn species quite easily, but took a little longer to remember others (or in some cases, such as with Zephia, or Charro the Fletchinder, had no recollection of their species at all).

Ryu's name came about merely because it used some letters from his species line, and because I thought it sounded cool. It had nothing to do with the Street Fighter character or, as I later learned, the name being *very* popular in all kinds of media (even having a TV Tropes page)! I do think he lived up to the name, though. ;)

Undoubtedly the most important thing I learned from writing Ryu was that a Riolu's aura sensors are *not* their ears. There's a reason why Ryu was annoyed at 'mon getting them mixed up. It's a serious business.

'Kyunn' is approximately the written sound made by Uxie/Azelf/Mesprit when you talk to them, just before battling, on Pokémon Diamond/Pearl/Platinum. And 'Emritia', the human name for Kyunn, is based off Mesprit's Japanese name 'Emrit'.

I made some minor changes to Pokémon biology. The one which you may well have noticed is removing the chest spike of Lucario. This piece of steel irritates me far too much. How is a Lucario supposed to hug? What would Fen do after Ryu's most dramatic of evolutions? Give him a handshake?!

- Similarly, Zephia had no green bangle in her mane, as Zoroark are supposed to. Evolution is a powerful thing, but creating a pre-tied hairband out of thin air? Seems a bit far. I feel like Zephia would just get rid of the thing anyway.

- And I made some Pokémon bigger/smaller than the Pokédex says. Shaice would be the most notable, as well as the weather Gods - though they were still pretty huge to begin with!

I deleted a vast amount of words and scenes that I sadly couldn't find a place for in the story. And I mean *a lot* - some chapters' 'deleted scenes' were as long as the finished chapter themselves! One of my favourite deleted segments would be Fen and Ryu fighting off a hoard of rabid Zubats inside the crumbling Fallarbor Pokémon Centre, as they're looking desperately (and in vain, for the oran berries have already been eaten) for medicine to heal an injured Shaice with. Savi appears just in time to put everyone to sleep… including Fen. Cue a very disappointed waking-up scene.

What's Next?

The story is perhaps not in its *completely* final form, since there may still be the odd typo scattered about. But since I have already combed through the whole story and changed everything I *could* notice, any major alterations are now off the table.

Unfortunately, unless I have a radical change of heart, there will be no *Fractured Elements* sequel. Nor will I be I writing another long PMD story, or any story of this kind of length, anytime soon. There are two main reasons for why.

Firstly, I'm writing in this in the summer before I enter my third and final year of university, which will be the toughest of all. And after that, I'll have to venture into the real world (*gasp*) and find myself something more substantial to be doing. Committing myself to another project as time-consuming as this one would therefore be unwise. It would frustrate myself more than anyone if I were unable to work on it as much as I wanted.

Secondly, I have poured *so much* into this story. Attempting to even think about another big project is just not possible right now. I am more than happy to take a step back for a while. My emotions will appreciate it.

However, I don't want to dramatically say that this is 'The End of *cynsh'.* A few ideas for other, Pokémon-focused pieces have occurred to me while writing this one. I can't promise that anything will come of those; but if it does, whenever that is, the words will be uploaded here!

(Edit 12/29/19: *Forbidden Dreams*, a oneshot following Shaice and Faoz's earlier years in Kyunn, has now been published. :))

(Edit 10/11/20: Turns out I was wrong about the 'no more long stories' thing. *Fighting Nature*, a very different take on a PMD setting and pokemon in general, is currently in progress)

I think that's just about everything. If there's anything more you'd like to say about the story - questions, thoughts, criticisms, seriously, *whatever* - I would love to chat! Either reviews or PMs are fine in that regard.

And once again, thank you so much for reading. PMD will hold a place in my heart forever, and I'm just glad I could contribute something to its world. So with that, as Ryu might say: "See ya later, 'mon!"

Epilogue

Author's Note 3/3/24

Hey there! It's probably been a while.

I was lucky to receive a lot of great feedback about Fractured Elements over the years. One of the things that a few people brought up was how suddenly the story ended. A lot of characters and plot points were left either unresolved, or just not quite resolved. Over time, I've come to agree. So, I thought I'd dip my toes into this story one last time. I hope you enjoy this little bonus chapter - it was a lot of fun, and very nostalgic, familiarising myself with it all again :)

"Tea?"

Zephia started, snapping out of a daze. She glanced up at the Lucario moving to sit beside her. A row of low, wooden stools had been set out at the side of the street. The building they previously belonged to - some kind of food centre, called a 'cafe', apparently - was still covered in rubble, but most of the furniture had been recovered.

Ryu had returned yesterday. Once they had arrived back in Sanguin Town and recovered some energy, he had set out to see his parents, out at some southern mountain. Zephia didn't know much about them, only what she'd heard from Fen and the others, so hadn't asked a lot of questions. She was surprised to see him return so soon, given how far he must have travelled. But whatever happened seemed to have been good, as he looked more calm and content than she had ever seen him.

Ryu was holding two clay cups, steaming with heat. Zephia peered inside them. The liquid was a pale green, with a couple of dark leaves floating inside. It smelt fresher than the soggy leaves looked.

When she glanced up at Ryu again, he was beaming a smile as wide as his ears. "What?" she snapped. "What is it?"

"Tea," Ryu said. "You make it with hot water and plant leaves. The 'mon from the grasslands have been telling everyone about it. Try it! It's warming."

"Wouldn't have guessed that," Zephia said, snatching a cup and taking a furtive sip.

Hm. She had to admit it wasn't half bad. Slightly bitter, with a nice fragrance to it.

"Rawst leaves help with stress and recovery, or so I've been told," Ryu went on. "I'm not used to this all herbal business. Back when I was little, the only remedies we were allowed were this bitter root that grew. I forget the name, but it was rock hard, my mother had to…"

Zephia looked out at the bustling streets. All around her were Pokémon. Some were busy building and rebuilding the wood, clay, and mud brick huts that lay in all directions. Some were like her, resting, eating, snoozing in the midday heat. Some ran, jostled, wrestled, or for one small quadrupedal 'mon, flung a tiny seed at a sibling while a parent kept them at claws' length.

But no one was angry, endangered, hurt, crying. Scared.

She had never known a place like this. It took all her concentration to not constantly scan the crowds for a flash of danger. Of course, it helped that the moment her muscles tightened, her strapped leg would spasm in protest. It would take at least a couple of moons before she could walk again, that strange egg-shaped creature in the healing ward had told her. She'd hardly been still for more than an afternoon until now.

"I never… hm? Zephia?" Ryu waved a paw in her face and she flinched instinctively. And sighed.

She turned to him properly. "Sorry, Ryu. Wasn't listening."

He smiled. "Still getting used to all this, eh?" He waved a paw at the street before them.

"Yeah, you could say that."

They sipped their tea for a moment.

"But it's beautiful," she said, then gulped, not quite believing those words had left her jaws.

"Ha! It sure is. Beats whatever the gods we were doing all that time before, eh?"

Zephia nodded slowly. "I think so."

Ryu's eyes flicked to her side. "Hey, what's that in your mane?"

Zephia picked the thick, red and black mop of fur off the floor. A teal coloured strip of fabric had been tied two-thirds of the way down, leaving the end to splay out like a patch of long grass.

"Faoz gave it to me. Said if I wasn't going to cut this thing I could at least keep it tidy." She brushed off a layer of dust it had accumulated on the ground. "Well. Try to."

"It's nice!" Ryu said. "Matches your eyes."

Zephia scoffed. "She said that too."

A silence stretched between them. Zephia was content to watch the street again, observe all this new, strange behaviour. A small bird flapped just barely over their heads and she almost flung a claw at it in surprise.

"Oh hey, it's Savi!" Ryu said suddenly, nudging her. She followed his paw, and sure enough a familiar Ivysaur was weaving through the

thong of bodies, accompanied by another quadrupedal blue-black 'mon she vaguely recognised.

Savi waved to them with a vine. "Hey guys! What's up?"

"Nothing much, 'mon," Ryu said. "Are you taking a break from the guild?"

"Just a short one. Faoz is working again today," Savi explained. "Even though she's supposed to be retiring, she really wants to see this last job through. It feels like her town more than anyone else's." He puffed his cheeks out. "To be honest, I'm still not sure why she thought I was the best replacement for her. Her daughter is way more used to managing tasks, and using ink, and smiling to everyone. I feel exhausted by it."

Faoz's 'guild', once used as a centre for Pokémon to request jobs and a lodging for those taking the jobs on, had now become the epicentre of Sanguin Town's rebuilding project. Zephia found the whole thing quite mystifying, how all these Pokémon could organise and gather themselves into the right places when the quantity of work seemed endless. It was somewhat of a relief to see Savi having a similar experience.

"Come on 'mon, you're doing fine," the blue 'mon reassured him, giving his side a nudge. "Faoz said herself it wouldn't be easy."

"Yeah, I know," Savi said, nudging him back. "Oh, Ryu, Scout is back too."

"Really?" Ryu asked, astonished. "But everyone thought he was-"

"I know. But he just turned up yesterday. Said that the moment he felt better, he had to get foraging for treasure again. Because no one else would be!" Savi looked puzzled as he said it. "I have no idea what goes on in his head. But I'm glad he's okay."

"I never properly apologised for burning down his shop," Ryu said, smiling sheepishly. "Gotta do that now I have the chance." He glanced at the other 'mon with Savi. "How are you, Lucxa?"

"Pretty good," the Luxio chirped. Zephia remembered now, it was Savi's brother. "Helping the 'mon out where I can. Family is getting better by the day too." His gaze wandered towards Zephia, then he suddenly stared, as if he'd only just seen her there. "Are you Zephia?" he asked.

The intensity of his look unnerved her. "Yes," she said. "What of it?"

His face lit up with delight. "Oh Mew, I've heard so much about you! Is it true you escaped a human prison? And flew to Kyunn on a Pidgeot's back?"

The adoration in his words made her bristle. "I'm not proud of what I did," she said, shifting uncomfortably.

That certainly dimmed Lucxa's enthusiasm. "I think it's pretty amazing though," he tried. "The stuff I've heard about you."

"Well, uh… thanks," Zephia muttered.

Lucxa pressed on, undeterred. "You can make illusions, right? Show things that aren't really there?"

Zephia nodded hesitantly. *Mew, he's just like a second Savi,* she thought.

"Could you show us one?" He grinned. "Just for fun. I can't imagine how it could work."

Zephia stared at him. Never had she been asked such a thing. "I don't really do it for fun," she said. "Only when it's necessary."

Lucxa frowned, disappointed. "C'mon Zephia, it doesn't have to be anything special," Ryu said to her encouragingly. "Just a small thing." He saw the reluctance in her and added softly, "Please?"

Zephia took a deep breath. Be nicer to people. That's what she had resolved to do. She lived here now. The support of others was important.

The problem was, she had never thought much about making illusions before. They seemed to merely present themselves when she needed them. She wasn't even sure what her limits were.

"I don't know what to show you," she confessed, feeling somehow embarrassed about it. Then, an idea suddenly came to her. Why this image, she couldn't say. But it was better than nothing. She took it.

Rain lashed down around them, wind howling through the exposed streets. It was dark, almost pitch-black, but Zephia's night vision was enough to navigate in. In front of her was a house. It was damaged, like everything here, with cracks in the walls and a hole in the left side of the roof, but it was intact. A faint fire glow emanated from a window next to the door, revealing four Pokémon clustered together. Monferno, Lucario, Ivysaur, and Mesprit, though she hadn't recognised the latter at that point.

Thunder rumbled, the sky flashed. Then she heard a yelp from *outside*, which abruptly dissolved the illusion like a bubble being pricked.

They were back in the town. Lucxa and Savi were staring at her like figurines, mouths open.

"That was INCREDIBLE!" Lucxa exclaimed, drawing looks from nearby 'mon. "I was there! I could *feel* the rain, but my fur is still dry!"

Zephia allowed herself a small smile.

"Thank you, Zephia," Savi beamed. He glanced eastwards in the direction of the guild. "We should really be getting back, Lux."

"Right." Lucxa grinned so widely that Zephia worried his jaw would break. "Great to meet you, Zephia! And you, Ryu! See you soon."

Zephia wagered she could still hear him muttering 'amazing… amazing' as they wandered off. She sighed. Tiring stuff.

"That was the house we sheltered at in Lilycove," Ryu said to her, and she nodded. "Why'd you show us that?"

She shrugged. "I just thought of it. I remember it very clearly."

"Why?"

She considered it. "I was nervous. I'd come a long way looking for you all, and there you just were. I wasn't sure how to just come back."

"So you decided to nearly knock the door down," Ryu said with a chuckle.

She shrugged again. "It worked."

They watched the street for a while. Then Zephia caught Ryu gazing at her with wonder, as if she were but a glistening cut of meat. "What?" she said.

"Just now, I was able to sense you," Ryu said. "Just a little bit, but-"

"What? You lost your sense of smell?"

He laughed, a proper laugh. "No, you doofus. I've never been able to sense your emotions. With most 'mon, especially ones I know, I can get this, it's kind of a signal, a pulse, how they're feeling. But your mind has always been hidden. Like a kabuto shell. Until now."

She considered his words for a while, and sat back on the stool. "I've let my guard down."

"Yes! Exactly! That has to be a good thing, right?"

She frowned. "I suppose so. You're not going to be reading my emotions all the time, are you?"

"No, of course not," Ryu said. "I won't pry into anything. Just thought it was cool."

This had all become too personal, Zephia thought. She much preferred having life-threatening problems to talk about instead. "Where's your boyfriend?" she ventured.

Ryu snorted. "Good one." He paused, putting both paws to his chin. "You know, I'm not sure. I haven't seen him since I got back. Before I left he said something about, uh, finding himself again?"

"Certainly easy to get lost here," Zephia murmured.

"It's weird not having him around, though. Feel like we've hardly left each other's sight since we first met."

"I'm sure he is relieved."

Ryu smirked. "And now *you're* stuck with me."

"Someone has to be, I suppose."

Their eyes met for a moment, and Ryu smiled back at her. Then he slowly got to his feet. "More tea?" he asked.

Zephia found, to her surprise, her cup was already empty. "Guess I can manage one more."

Fen tried to remember. The flames were… on her forehead? Or was it further back, between the ears? That sounded reasonable. He dipped his index finger into the pot of ink beside him, and tried to emulate how the fire had flowed. It was like a series of sharp turns, one short, one long, unpredictable.

He sat at the edge of a hill, on the western edge of Sanguin Town, where he and Ryu had never had a chance to explore. The land cut away suddenly here, overlooking distant plains, forest, and

Manaphy's Pond just below, a wide river that apparently spanned almost all of Kyunn. It had never occurred to Fen before how, despite how often they had conveniently found water on their travels, it might all be connected by one stream.

He stopped drawing and held the parchment at arms' length. Not bad. Now for the body. It was… roundish. Slimmer coming from the neck? He dearly wished he had access to a pencil. Using ink required a precision that his stubby fingers did not agree with…

"Whatcha doing?"

Fen yelped and instinctively shot his arms across the parchment. Unfortunately, his inked finger was still wet, and he cursed at the sight of it smudging half of the page. He looked up at Cyan, who stood just behind him, smiling.

"It's uh… nothing."

He tried to quickly turn the parchment aside, but the Quilava caught the edge with her paw. She sat down in the grass next to him. "Is this supposed to be *me* ?" she asked.

"I was trying to-" Fen gulped, badly. He seemed to have swallowed something very large. "I was thinking about when I first saw you, I was so struck by your flames and how they moved, and wanted to try and capture that, but I didn't…" He trailed off. "It's bad. I'm still trying to remember how to draw. It's bad, but-"

"It's lovely," Cyan said, taking the parchment from him and setting it down, more carefully, on her lap. "I didn't know you drew."

Fen looked at his toes. "Neither did I, until I remembered."

Cyan lowered her head a little. "This was something the human you did?"

"Yeah. While I worked in the Pokémon sanctuary. Most of the time I was looking after the Pokémon, since they were mostly kits. But sometimes, if I had a spare minute where none of the Pokémon were wailing, or asking for food, or trying to, you know, uh…"

"Procreate?" Cyan offered.

Fen nodded. He had a great urge to dive into the lake a hundred metres below. "Yeah, so if I had a spare minute, I would get my sketchbook out and draw what I could see. It was one of my favourite things to do. So I wanted to try and rediscover it here, given I finally have some time. Although, you guys don't have pencils or sketchbooks, and I don't think these fingers were designed for delicate work, so it's tricky…"

Cyan hummed, and to his horror started thumbing through his other sketches from the afternoon. "You're being harsh. I think they're great."

She pulled out one page. It looked like a rough approximation of a skull, with a round tube underneath, triangle for a tail, and a couple of button eyes on its face. Still, it was unmistakable to him.

"Who's this?" she asked.

"He was…" Fen paused. "Cubbs. My best friend in the whole world. My inspiration."

Cyan looked stricken. "Fen, I didn't realise… I'm so sorry about what happened to you. I heard the story. I couldn't believe it."

Fen shook his head. "You couldn't have known." He looked at the Cubone drawing again. "It hurts, sometimes. Often. Thinking about everything I had before. Everything I can't get back. But I don't want to forget about it, either. Those things happened, and I want to use the experiences and the memories I have for good, somehow." He gestured at the scattered papers. "Maybe that's why I started doing these."

"Well, you did save the world. That's pretty good."

Fen was acutely aware of the heat of her fur a few inches away. Lovely, soft fur. "Thanks," he squeaked. He cleared his throat. "But I don't know if we really saved the *world.* Ryu likes saying it, but was Rayquaza's threat actually real? Would Groudon and Kyogre have really kept fighting forever? I'm not sure. All I know is-"

"You saved Sanguin Town," Cyan said, nudging him with a paw. "That's valuable enough, to me."

Fen met her eyes, and managed to smile back at her. Though he couldn't mistake the sadness in her expression. With shame, he realised he'd never asked anyone, really, about the time between their days in Hoenn.

"What was it like here, while we were gone?"

Cyan thought for a while, stroking one ear absently. "It was like a really awful dream," she said. "Everyone was afraid. And angry. We knew that we weren't behaving like ourselves. But we couldn't stop it, either. I don't think anyone really ate. Barely anyone could speak, or even move. I felt like I was losing my grip on the world. Like a slippery rock face after a storm. And it *was* a storm out there. Constantly."

She paused. "And then suddenly… the weather changed. We woke up again. There was this great feeling of hope. We looked at the ruin the town had become. And the mayor, for once, pulled his weight and put together a rebuilding task force. And now we're getting back on track."

It was quite a sight that met Fen as Shaice had finally landed on the hillside they had first taken off from on the edge of town. Hundreds, if not thousands of Pokémon had gathered, a cacophony of colours, shapes, sizes, far more than Fen had ever seen in one place. They had watched Shaice from the moment his crescent wings had come over the horizon.

Only one Pokémon left in Sanguin Town had known about their mission: Buin, Faoz's daughter. She hadn't been shy about spreading the news.

The town then did not quite reflect the jubilation of its residents. On the last day they had spent in Sanguin Town before flying to Hoenn, a band of refugees had nearly torn the town apart in their fury at not being promised shelter. After that day, Ferri, the serene Furret that was somehow mayor of the town, had no grounds to refuse any Pokémon entry. With the constant worsening of natural disasters, any weather-dependent habitat - which was almost anywhere beyond Sanguin - was too dangerous to remain. It all meant that, in the space of a few days, the town housed the majority of all civilised Pokémon on the island. Every inch of shelter had been set upon by tired, anxious bodies. Even the Pokémon from the erupted Arkan Volcano - including, to Fen's relief, Charro the Fletchinder and Leo the Flareon - had wound up there.

But, following the end of Groudon and Kyogre's war, progress had come remarkably fast. Already, just a few days after their arrival, houses had been rebuilt, a few merchants were starting to replenish stocks, and it once again was starting to resemble the chaotic, bustling centre of life that Fen had first fallen into. It was still overcrowded and a mess of building work, but the crowds carried an energy and optimism that Fen could hardly believe, after the weeks of misery they had all suffered.

"It's funny," Fen said, after a while. "Kyunn is barely known of in the human world. If you'd told a younger me that a place like this existed, a land of only Pokémon, nature left untouched, I'd have been desperate to see it, even if only for a short visit. But to actually get to *live* here? I couldn't have dreamed of it." He smiled. "If it wasn't for Cubbs, I wouldn't be sitting here now. I have to be grateful for that."

"Well," Cyan said, "there's still a way to go before it's this paradise you're imagining."

"True. And the streets could still use better signposting."

"Hey, try being here when I was a kit," Cyan snapped. "Mew, I was stumbling around like a Psychic had my legs."

Fen chuckled. He picked at the grass between his feet. Then took a deep breath.

"I always wondered, Cyan, when I first met you…"

"Mhm?"

"Why were you so… so nice? I was so *clueless* . Asking you how to breathe fire. I can't believe you didn't just laugh at me and walk away."

"Well," the Quilava flashed a grin. "I thought it was cute. Fires are normally very proud. You don't usually get one approaching someone and saying they'd like some help. Get even less saying they don't know how to do *anything* ."

"Sure," Fen said. "Hence why you thought I meant something else."

Cyan snorted. "Look, I've been around enough loud, impulsive, fire-bellied guys to get a sense for things like that." She turned her eyes on Fen. They were dark, scarlet red, pricked with little white jewels where the afternoon sun hit across the river. "But I was wrong about you, eh? You're a hero now."

"Don't be silly," Fen said, waving his hands in front of him. *Like a stupid Magikarp,* he later reflected. "I didn't do anything special. Just… happened to get mixed up in it all."

Cyan smirked. "Still very humble though. Alright."

Fen wanted to make another riposte, but thought better of it. Somehow, this wasn't something he wanted to argue with her.

"What do you think you'll do now?" Cyan asked, looking out across the valley. "Sounds like you covered most of the south already. Feel up for the north next?"

"Oh, absolutely," Fen said, glad to have a firmer grip on this subject. "I want to see as much as I can. Meet new Pokémon, new habitats, new cultures. If it's anything like what I've already seen, I can't wait." He looked back at the distant, bulging ring of Sanguin Town behind them. "But there's plenty to do here first. Rebuilding the town. Finding homes for all the Pokémon displaced. Helping Savi balance all his plates at the guild."

Cyan nodded. "All valid points. I should stop lazing about too."

She started getting to her feet, sparks flickering from her head's flame sacs.

Before he could think about it, Fen blurted, "But, Cyan?"

She turned around. "Hm?"

"While I'm here… I'd really love to spend more time with you, too."

A flicker of surprise crossed her face, then it softened into a smile. "Honestly, Fen," she sighed. "For someone who apparently doesn't know anything, you figured out how to charm me pretty well." She opened her arms out. "Come on then."

It was hard, Fen reflected, trying to reconcile the memories, and senses, and feelings even, of his old self with who he was now. He wasn't a human. He never could be. Even now, as adjusted as he could be to this body, it was a scary thought.

But, when he wrapped his arms around Cyan and breathed in her warm, bright, smoky fur, he got the feeling that everything, somehow, would turn out all right.